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Afterglow

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vol.4





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Afterglow



VOL.4



June

Yaoi



Novel



“I swear. I swear a million times, I love you, only you...”

“I want you to let me love you. And please...I want you to love me, too...”

Written By
Saki Aida
January 3rd
Blood Type: AB

The bottled fruit milk from the bathhouse tastes exceptional.

Illustrated By
Chiharu Nara
Born: June
Blood Type: O

I hope spring comes soon for everyone. Thank you very much.



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Los Angeles



Tokyo

S Vol.4

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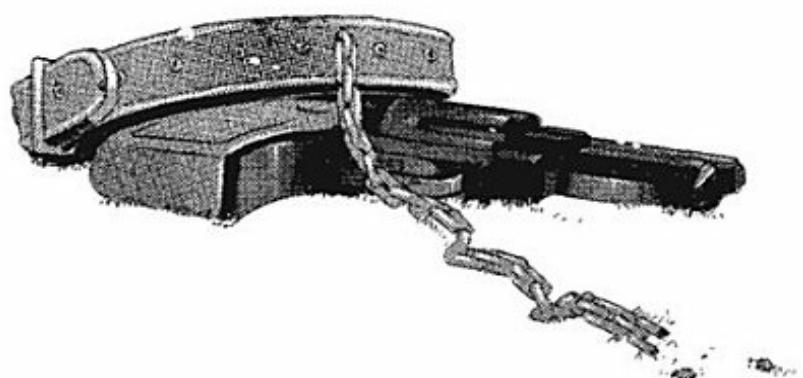
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Chapter 1

“What are you gonna do, mister?” the taxi driver asked in an irritated voice. He was about to lose his temper because he had been told to stop on the shoulder of the road for about five minutes now while his passenger debated whether or not he was going to get off.

Masaki Shiiba looked out of the window from the back seat of the taxi, then faced forward and took out his wallet. “I’ll get off here,” he finally said.

After paying and getting out of the taxi, Shiiba slowly walked along the sidewalk until he stopped in front of a door. One word was written on it—“Falsare.” Motoaki Matsukura had taken Shiiba to this club in Roppongi before. Falsare was well-known, often frequented by celebrities.

It was late at night on a weekday, but a lot of pedestrians were still walking about. A group of loudly chattering young men and women passed behind Shiiba.

Shiiba stared at the stainless-steel door and asked himself, Is this really okay? If I open this door and go inside, there’s no turning back.

His heart didn’t waver. After making sure that his decision was firm, he clutched something in his black trench coat. The hard, cold sensation that reached his fingertips made him more and more nervous.

He never imagined that a day would come when he would have to rely on it. But he didn’t care. Right now, he wasn’t there as a police detective. If he wasn’t prepared to make use of everything he possibly could, he couldn’t hold his own against that man.

He pushed open the door and went inside. A black man wearing a patterned suit stood at the end of the long, narrow hallway.

“Hey Jesse,” Shiiba said in a friendly voice, smiling. “Remember me? I’m Kuro’s friend.”

Perhaps because he recognized Kuro’s name, the black man nodded slightly and opened the door for Shiiba.

After paying the entrance fee, Shiiba pushed open the door that led to the dance floor. He was assaulted by the noisy trance music’s heavy bass. The intense, low beat of the loud music reverberated in his chest. All the young people packed on the dance floor were undulating to its rhythm.

Shiiba stood by the wall and turned his gaze towards the second floor VIP

room. A young man wearing a suit stood in front of the room. Shiiba didn't recognize the bodyguard tonight.

But he knew—Takanari Godou was inside that room.

After parting with Keigo Munechika at the hospital, Shiiba had taken care of some errands in Shinjuku, and then, riding a taxi, headed towards Ebisu to see Godou, the boss of the Godou Syndicate. But just as he had been about to get out in front of Godou's condo, he had seen Godou getting into a car in the parking lot. So he had told his taxi driver to follow Godou's car. Godou had gotten out of the black Mercedes Benz outside of Falsare with two other men.

Shiiba wasn't sure if Godou was meeting someone in the club. But he was certain that Godou, one of his male subordinates, and four women wearing glitzy clothes were inside the VIP room. Godou usually traveled with a bigger retinue, so the fact that he was with a small group tonight was a perfect chance for Shiiba.

Shiiba left the dance floor and returned to the hallway. If he continued to the right, he would be able to go directly to the second floor. He tried to calm himself down by lighting up a cigarette. It was fine to be nervous, but he had to look like things were under control.

From the back of the hallway, a young man, who seemed to be an employee, came out carrying a large bouquet.

"Wow, that's a nice bouquet," Shiiba cheerfully called out to the young man.

The young employee smiled sociably and answered with pride, "It is, isn't it?"

"Where are you bringing that?" Shiiba asked. "The VIP room?"

"Yes," the young man answered. "It's a present for a guest."

Something suddenly came to Shiiba. "Oh, did the owner, Godou-san, ask for it?"

The employee looked surprised. He eyed Shiiba carefully. "Are you a friend of the owner's? Excuse me, I didn't know."

As Shiiba watched the employee bow his head to him, he laughed inside. He remembered Motoaki saying he was friends with the owner, so he had tried his luck. Just as he had thought, this club did belong to Godou.

Shiiba put out his cigarette and came closer to the employee. "I'll take that to Godou-san. I was just about to go upstairs."

"B-but..." the young man started to protest.

"Oh, it's okay," said Shiiba, "it's okay. Here, let me. It's on my way, so it's

not a big deal.”

He took the bouquet from the employee’s hands, who looked conflicted. But the young man seemed to realize that he couldn’t be rude to an acquaintance of the owner’s. He bowed his head again and said, “Well then, I’ll leave it to you.”

Shiiba went up to the second floor and walked down the hallway to the VIP room. A subordinate of Godou’s was standing in the very back. The blinds were down over the glass windows of the VIP room, so he couldn’t see anything inside. But that detail worked to Shiiba’s advantage. He shoved his right hand in his coat pocket and held the bouquet in his left hand. The bodyguard blocked the door with a stern look on his face.

“What do you want?” the man growled.

“Delivery,” Shiiba replied quickly. “Did one of your guests order a bouquet?”

The man looked at Shiiba suspiciously and held out his hand, gesturing for Shiiba to hand the bouquet over.

Shiiba shook the outstretched hand. “I’ll deliver it myself. Tell Godou that Shiiba is here.”

“I was told not to let anyone through,” the man said stubbornly.

“If he knows you turned me away, he’ll be angry,” Shiiba said in a stern tone of voice. “Are you okay with that?”

The man clicked his tongue and said, “Wait here,” and opened the door. “Godou-san, someone named Shiiba is here—” Shiiba pushed the man’s back as hard as he could. They both tumbled into the room, and Shiiba quickly closed the door behind him.

“Bastard,” the man growled.

Shiiba quickly aimed his pistol at the man’s forehead. The man raised his hands and went pale.

“Get back,” Shiiba ordered coldly. “You, too,” he added to the two other bodyguards. “Go behind the sofa and put your hands on the wall. If you move even an inch, I’ll shoot.” The two men obeyed with frustrated looks on their faces.

A pleasant-sounding voice reached Shiiba’s ears, saying, “You’re in a bad mood tonight, aren’t you?” Godou didn’t seem agitated by Shiiba’s intrusion. He looking relaxed, sitting with his legs crossed over the leather sofa, surrounded by attractive foreign models. He looked like some ad straight out of

a fashion magazine.

A woman with long hair was sitting down beside him like a doll. She was wearing a slip dress with a vivid flower print and had a thin shawl wrapped around her shoulders. She sported heavy black eyeliner and red eye shadow. She looked at Shiiba without blinking. He couldn't read her expression because of her heavy makeup, but just like Godou she was acting normally and didn't seem the least bit frightened.

“Delivery.” Shiiba tossed the bouquet over to the table, noticing that one of the men facing the wall had started to lower his hands.

Since the man hadn't heeded Shiiba's warning, Shiiba pulled the trigger. The dry sound of the gunshot rang out and, at the same time, the bullet shot through the wall right next to the man's face.

“I thought I told you not to move,” Shiiba said in a low voice. “Next time I won't miss. Got it?” The man nodded.

Shiiba pointed the gun towards Godou.

“That's not a gun issued by the police, hmm? How'd you get it?” Godou asked with a slight smile on his face. Even with a gun pointed at him, he didn't seem to care. It wasn't that he was trying to act cool, he seriously had no fear.

“You know what my job is,” Shiiba replied.

Godou shrugged and smiled. He looked like he was so amused he couldn't stand it. “Did a detective from COC5 buy a gun from the black market? My, how the great gun hunter has fallen. Please tell me what changed you, a police officer who was once the defender of justice.”

Shiiba found the words “defender of justice” coming from Godou's mouth ridiculous. His mouth twitched. “What the police wants to uphold isn't justice,” he retorted. “It's law and order.”

“Well, right now you're violating law and order,” said Godou. “In other words, you've graduated from being a detective, hmm?”



“Yeah, I’m not a detective anymore.” It was true. Shiiba had turned in his resignation. However, his boss, Takasaki, wouldn’t receive it until the next day, so Shiiba was still technically a detective that night.

“You were right to quit.” Godou nodded emphatically as if he was talking about business. “You’re not cut out to be a detective.”

Shiiba had a gun pointed at the man, but he wasn’t in control of the situation. Godou’s calm attitude was shaking him up and his fingertips began to get damp with sweat.

“But does Munechika know?” Godou mused. “He tried so hard to protect you, but you stepped all over those feelings. How cruel.”

“Cut the bullshit. I didn’t come here to screw around.” Shiiba glared at Godou coldly across the table. “I came here to kill you.”

Godou narrowed his eyes with interest. He stroked the long hair of the girl beside him. “Before you pull the trigger, tell me why.”

“You killed my sister, and you tried to kill Munechika,” Shiiba said between clenched teeth.

“Your sister?” Godou said, playing dumb. “What are you talking about?”

Shiiba thrust the barrel of the gun at him. “Eight years ago you shot and killed a woman named Yukari Shinozuka. In order to protect his nephew—you—the boss of the Togetsu Syndicate made a young member of the Togetsu Syndicate turn himself in, making him the scapegoat.”

Godou touched his lips to the woman’s hair and murmured, “That’s an old story. Why are you bringing up now a story that’s eight years old? You’d sacrifice your life for some moldy old thing like that? What a foolish man.” Godou’s voice was not teasing, but actually sounded sympathetic.

Shiiba started to become more impatient. “You don’t understand how I feel. My sister was my only...I have the right to know the truth. Answer me, Godou. Did you shoot her?” He again aimed the gun at Godou’s forehead. His finger was on the trigger and it trembled slightly. His forehead started to sweat and his breathing became rough.

Even if he acted like he was calm, he was actually scared. Depending on Godou’s answer, he didn’t know what he would do. In just a few seconds, he might become a murderer. But what he was most scared of was that even if that happened, there was no fear in his heart. He honestly thought it would be better if Godou was dead.

“Shiiba, if you want to shoot, shoot,” Godou answered quietly as he gazed

at Shiiba.

Shiiba shook his head. “That’s not what I want to hear.”

“That’s my answer.”

“Will you admit it? That you’re the one who did it?”

Shiiba wouldn’t be satisfied with such a vague answer. He wanted an admission of guilt. He wanted to hear Godou say, “I shot her.”

“I won’t admit it, but you’re free to shoot me,” Godou said in a carefree voice. “Do whatever you like.”

Burning anger welled up in Shiiba’s chest. Godou probably thought he wouldn’t shoot.

Shiiba stepped forward threateningly. “Godou, I told you I didn’t come here to screw around.”

“Yes, I heard,” said Godou. “But even if you kill me, I don’t feel like telling you the truth.”

“Why? If you don’t tell me, do you think you can be saved?” Shiiba yelled, irritated.

Godou pulled up the corner of his mouth into a smirk. It made Shiiba sick.

“You don’t want the truth,” Godou said confidently, “you just want an excuse to kill me.”

Shiiba gulped. It was as if Godou had read his mind.

“You just want to kill me, don’t you?” Godou continued. “You just want a reason to protect yourself. Just so you know, I didn’t kill your sister. Don’t accuse someone when you don’t have any proof.”

“I don’t believe you,” Shiiba said stubbornly.

“That’s up to you,” Godou said. “But one of my subordinates did shoot Munechika.”

The man denied one thing and admitted another. Shiiba didn’t know if Godou was tricking him or if what he said was true. Confusion crept into his chest. But he had to ignore that right now.

“That’s enough reason for me,” he said.

He had sworn a promise to Munechika. He had sworn that if Munechika ever came into any danger, he would risk his own life to protect him. So in order to avenge Munechika, he would kill Godou. He had a justifiable reason. He didn’t think it was wrong to call that justice. Godou was at fault here. That was clear. So all he had to do now was to follow his own feelings, not the law.

“Why are you out to get Munechika?” he asked. “Because he was in your

way?"

"In my way?" Godou echoed. "What does that mean?"

"You want to gain control of the Matsukura Group," Shiiba accused. "You won over the boss, Motoaki, but as long as Munechika is in the picture, you can't get to the group from the inside. It wouldn't be strange to want to get rid of Munechika for that reason."

It was just a guess, but when Shiiba thought of the fact that Godou was currently trying to gain control of various other organizations, the likelihood of that scenario being true was high.

"It's true that the Matsukura Group looks attractive to me," Godou declared with conviction, "but it's not like I desperately want it or anything. I wanted Munechika gone because of a personal grudge. Shiiba, if you really want to protect him, you can't kill me. If you do, you'll regret it."

"What does that mean?" Shiiba asked suspiciously.

"I've given someone a gun and hundreds of bullets. We signed a contract that said every time he fired a slug into Keigo Munechika's body, the reward would be one million yen. Do you understand now?" Godou looked up at Shiiba and smiled, waiting for a response.

"You..." Shiiba trailed off. He took deep breaths in order to regain his composure. "So in other words, you still have a hit on Munechika so it would be more dangerous to kill you."

"Even if I die, he'll still get paid," Godou revealed. "So this game will continue. The only one who can stop it is me. That was the agreement from the beginning. It's a lot of money, so he won't kill Munechika right away. He can pull the trigger and shoot away Munechika's organs. But, if he does hit something critical, I guess it's game over."

A gruesome game that would continue until Munechika died, with the purpose of tormenting Munechika and everyone around him.

"And he's not someone who can be caught easily," Godou said in a pleased voice, crossing his arms. "Poor thing. Even if his injury heals and he gets out of the hospital, Munechika will get shot again."

The situation wasn't progressing well as more time passed. Shiiba felt the sweat that had beaded on his forehead begin to run. This isn't how it was supposed to happen...Shiiba thought as he grew more and more impatient. He wanted to get it over with as soon as possible.

No matter what Godou's excuse was, Shiiba still wanted to shoot him.

But he was completely caught up in Godou's pace. And even though he knew it wouldn't do him any good, he couldn't stop talking. He wanted to know what Godou was thinking no matter what.

"Why do you hate Munechika so much?" he asked.

"I have a grudge against him," Godou answered. "You should know the feeling. You think I killed your sister. You're here because you want to clear that grudge against me. That's why you hate me so much that you want to kill me. You don't have to tell me that."

"Stop it," Shiiba growled. "Don't compare me to you!"

Godou tilted his head with a strange look on his face. "Why? Aren't we the same? Let's say I did kill your sister. And because of that you'll kill me. What's the difference between two murderers? The burden of the sin of taking another person's life is the same."

"It's not the same. I have a reason." Shiiba struggled to not show the trembling of his voice as he tightened his grip on his gun.

"Anyone can have a reason," Godou pointed out. "I'm sure whoever killed your sister had a reason. Maybe there were circumstances beyond his control."

Shiiba hung on to Godou's every word. He knew he wasn't doing something that was right. But he also didn't think he was wrong. He had come to that place because he knew he had to do this, and he knew that it was the best thing to do. But now his resolve was wavering.

As Shiiba realized he was having trouble breathing, he argued in a hoarse voice, "I'll throw away my life to pull this trigger."

"And? You think you'll be forgiven?" Godou said in a teasing voice. "So you're going to kill me and then give yourself up. You'll live in prison for about ten years, then return to society and live a normal life. You might lose social trust and a part of your long life, but that's not a big deal. Don't say exaggerated things like you're going to throw your life away."

Shiiba started to get confused. All he had thought about was killing Godou. He hadn't given any thought to what would happen after that. Actually, he had thought that after he had killed Godou then his life would be over.

Godou looked at Shiiba with pity in his eyes. "You're confused because you're clinging to reason. Put down your gun."

"Shut up!" Shiiba's desire to murder Godou boiled up again and he tightened his grip on the gun.

Don't back down now. You came all this way, there's no turning back now.

If you give up now, you're just giving Godou what he wants. You shouldn't care if you're wrong. Kill him. Kill this man.

Shiiba felt the urge to twist himself away from the darkness of his ego, which was like air bubbles slowly rising to the surface from the bottom of a mud pit.

He'd been waiting for this moment. He had longed for this moment for eight years.

All the negative feelings he felt because of Yukari's death coiled inside of him and smoldered like an incomplete combustion system. The anger that resided in the deepest parts of his heart had never been extinguished. Those black flames ordered Shiiba to pull the trigger. To shoot Godou before his heart burnt out, before it turned to ash. If he did that, he would finally get some relief. He would be freed from the cage of this endless hate. He would be free.

But his reason was as strong as those feelings, and it stopped him.

Godou was the one who killed Yukari. Even if he didn't have solid evidence, all of Shiiba's instincts were telling him that this man was the culprit.

But what if...what if he was wrong? What if Godou wasn't the one who had killed Yukari?

And if he killed Godou, he would have to deal with the man who was after Munechika. A man, whose identity Shiiba didn't know anything about, who would be trying to shoot Munechika as many times as possible.

The woman stood up, interrupting Shiiba's thoughts.

"Don't move!" Shiiba yelled.

The woman didn't respond, but she slowly put her own body between Shiiba's and Godou's. She was trying to protect Godou, which further swayed Shiiba's feelings.

"Move," Godou told the woman in a gentle voice.

But she didn't move an inch. She was staring at Shiiba straight-on. Her black eyes were strong, enough to sway the heart of any onlooker.

His heart became frozen. He couldn't believe it, but the heat of rage in him started to diminish.

He kept the gun aimed at her as he approached her. He held out his left hand and took the woman's shawl from her shoulders. The thin shawl slipped off her white skin.

He looked at her right arm and was astonished by what he saw. She had a tattoo of a one-winged butterfly.

"Kiri...Yoshizawa?" His voice lowered to a shocked whisper as he uttered

the name.

The girl put her hand on her head. Her long hair, which hid the outline of her face, dropped to the floor with a thud, revealing an uneven hair that looked like she had cut herself. After removing her wig, it was clear that this woman was Kiri Yoshizawa.

He couldn't believe that this slender, beautiful woman was the scrawny nineteen-year-old girl he had seen in the greasy work clothes at the ironworks.

"Why are you here?" he asked incredulously.

Of course Kiri couldn't answer him. Even though he knew that, he couldn't help asking anyway. That was how unbelievable the reality of the situation was to him.

She and her elderly grandfather made a modest living, but she had led a life filled with misfortune. She had lost her ability to speak after both her parents had committed suicide.

Shiiba had wanted to encourage her because she was working so hard to manage the ironworks. He had developed an inkling of how Godou and Kiri were connected. The probability of her being involved with the production of illegal guns was high. But Shiiba was shocked that there was a possibility that the two of them had an intimate relationship.

So Kiri really was making illegal guns after all? She made such elaborate pistols with those small hands.

"Kiri, be a good girl and get out of the way," Godou repeated.

But Kiri still did not move. If she was protecting Godou, then that must mean that she was voluntarily going along with him. She wasn't being threatened—she was with him of her own free will.

The realization made Shiiba feel so tense and nervous that he felt he would explode any minute.

Kiri felt something special for Godou. He didn't think he would be able to kill Godou in front of her, in front of her dry eyes. She had lost her voice after witnessing her parents' suicides. He didn't want to throw her into the same kind of shock again.

Shiiba closed his eyes and put down the gun. He felt an inexpressible sense of defeat and frustration as he felt all the power slip away from his body.

Sensing that Shiiba had lost his desire to kill, Kiri returned to her original position.

"Shiiba, you don't have to look so upset that you didn't kill me. As long as you feel that way, you can kill me anytime. I won't run away or hide." Godou's

voice seemed far away.

Enough. Don't say anything more. I failed.

Shiiba wanted to curl up into a ball, but he just stared at his own feet. He couldn't help but react to Godou's next words.

"If you really want to protect Munechika, you'll belong to me."

"What?"

Godou stood from the couch. Since he was taller than Shiiba, he looked down at the detective.

"If you become mine, I'll tell the man who's after Munechika to forget about the contract," Godou clarified. "Of course I'll still have to pay him off, but I'll just think of it as the price of buying you."

Perhaps it was because Shiiba had just been so nervous, but he couldn't think straight. He couldn't immediately grasp what Godou was saying.

"What's in it for you?" he said in a weak voice as his arms dropped to his sides. He looked up at Godou.

"I'll have the thing most important to Munechika," Godou answered. "That will please me more than anything else in the world. Just think of it as a sort of transaction. You want to protect Munechika, right?"

"And if I refuse, there'll still be a hit on him?" Shiiba asked.

"That's right," said Godou. "I don't know when he'll die. He's caught up in a game of Russian roulette now."

Shiiba stared at Godou, dazed. He felt numb and couldn't make a calm decision. He didn't know what to do.

"How do I know you'll keep your promise?" he asked.

Godou shrugged and then shoved both hands in his pockets. "You just have to trust me. My goal isn't to kill Munechika. It's to hurt him. And if you become mine, then that will give him the greatest pain imaginable."

Shiiba couldn't see through Godou's plan. He stared at the man's cruel eyes. He didn't know what Godou's true intent was. He didn't know if the man wanted him or if Godou just wanted to defeat Munechika.

"I don't want to hurt you anymore," Godou continued. "If I do, I know I'll have to deal with your crazy brother-in-law."

Shiiba couldn't completely trust Godou. He was sure of that. But he knew he had to accept.

"So what do you say, Shiiba?" Godou asked.

Shiiba looked down and licked his dry lips. If he left now, he would just

keep on being confused. He would hang on to this anger that he didn't know what to do with, and wander around in a maze with no way out.

But if he accepted Godou's offer, he might find out something. Right now they were in a stalemate, but he might be able to make some progress.

He put the pistol back in his pocket. It was sink or swim, and he decided to gamble on the chance of progressing this way. He hated having to go back.

"I'll go with you," he answered. "But if you're using me as some kind of a trap for Munechika, I won't hesitate to kill you. I'm going to do everything I can to protect him."

Godou put a finger under Shiiba's chin and nodded. "Relax. Don't worry. He's a tolerant man." Shiiba got a strange feeling from the warmth of Godou's finger. He turned his face away, and Godou whispered softly into his ear, "If you're worried, you can always carry that gun with you for safety."

Shiiba stared at Godou. He had no other choice but to participate in Godou's dangerous game. He didn't care if it was a trap. If he didn't make a move, nothing would change.

Chapter 2

“Will you get out your cell phone?” Godou said as they left the club and got into Godou’s car.

Shiiba took his phone out of his pocket and Godou ordered him to send a text message.

“A text message?” Shiiba asked. “To who?”

“Your brother-in-law,” Godou told him. “He’s the most dangerous person right now. Tell him you won’t be able to contact him for a while and not to worry. Hey, are there any dogs behind us?”

His driver checked to make sure no one was following them.

“Then go to Hayama as planned,” Godou directed.

“Hayama?” Shiiba murmured suspiciously.

Godou put his arm around Kiri and brought her close. “Kiri and I will be at my villa for a while. We’re bringing you along.”

After Shiiba was done texting Shinozuka, Godou took the cell phone away and turned it off. The car left Falsare, getting on to the Yokohama Yokosuka highway then turning into the Zuyo Toll Road.

They arrived at the villa after about an hour.

It was night so Shiiba couldn’t see clearly, but it looked like Godou’s villa was an impressive structure along the coastline.

An elderly man in his sixties appeared in the doorway. He bowed deeply to Godou, saying, “Welcome home.”

Perhaps because the house was Western-style, they didn’t take their shoes off in the entryway. The interior was decorated in an art-deco style, almost resembling Falsare. Apparently Godou was fond of this kind of decadent style.

Shiiba surveyed his surroundings.

Godou said, “I hate rooms with tatami and fusuma. Probably an adverse reaction to being brought up in a gloomy Japanese-style house.” He stroked the ornate doorknob lovingly.

His uncle was the boss of the Togetsu Syndicate, so he had probably been raised in the man’s house. Apparently Godou didn’t have fond memories of the place.

Godou led Shiiba downstairs. He brought him to a room in the basement. It was a room about thirty-two square feet with no window. There was a large

LCD television and expensive-looking sound equipment. The only other thing there was a sofa.

“Who was that man?” Shiiba asked.

“A live-in employee,” Godou told him. “He takes care of the house and if I have guests, he acts as a butler.”

“Do you often invite people to come over?” Shiiba continued to probe.

“Only Kiri and Motoaki,” Godou revealed. “It’s kind of like my hiding place. I only come here about once a month.”

So he came here rarely and had an employee staying permanently. Shiiba coldly thought what a waste of money that was. He scowled at Godou.

“Where’s Kiri?” he asked next.

Ever since they had entered the house, he hadn’t seen her.

“Probably taking a shower,” said Godou. “She doesn’t like wearing makeup, so she always washes her face the moment we get home.”

“What’s your relationship with her?” Shiiba questioned.

Instead of answering his question, Godou said, “Seems like you’re fond of Kiri. If you want her, I don’t mind.”

Shiiba frowned, not understanding his meaning.

Godou smiled, looking amused. “I’m saying if you want to sleep with her, I don’t care. Just because you’ve been with Munechika doesn’t mean you don’t like women, right?” He said it soothingly, but anger shot through Shiiba. “I wouldn’t mind, really, if you’re sexually frustrated. But it would be like sleeping with a doll.”

“So you play around with girls like her?” Shiiba said in a reproachful tone of voice. “You’re using her like a toy, just like Motoaki. Sounds like something you’d do.”

Godou raised an eyebrow. “A toy? That’s going too far. I believe I mentioned it before, but Motoaki is with me because he wants to be. Same with Kiri. I’ve never forced either of them to do anything.”

“Yeah, right,” Shiiba spat.

Godou brought the subject back to Munechika. “Was Munechika the first man you’ve been with? What was it like the first time you had sex? Wasn’t it the first time you ever felt satisfied by sex?” Not waiting for an answer, he continued. “You want a man more than a woman.”

“You don’t know anything,” Shiiba interrupted, irritated by Godou’s words.

Godou sat down on the sofa’s armrest, still with an amused look on his

face. “I bet you’ve never gotten excited from sleeping with a woman. Men catch your eye more than women do. You hate it, but you can’t help it. Am I wrong? You love men more than women. You have too much pride so you can’t show anyone your weaknesses, so you can’t seek out others. Luckily you had your job. You’re a coward who can’t forgive yourself for having sex with a man without a reason.”

“What are you trying to say?” Shiiba felt wary. He thought Godou was teasing him, but at some point the man had started stepping into some dangerous territory.

Godou smiled and threw the finishing blow. “Nothing. It’s just my own analysis of you. You’re too transparent. You try to wear layers and layers of clothes to hide your true self. When I see someone like that, it makes me want to peel off a layer of my own clothing.”

“You’ve already seen me naked,” Shiiba said with a dark smile.

He was being sarcastic, remembering the one time Godou had seen him having sex with Munechika.

But Godou just shook his head lightly, looking unimpressed. “Unfortunately Munechika was in the way and I couldn’t see very well. But it was still quite an entertaining show. It was the first time I had ever seen Munechika seriously having sex in front of someone else.”

Shiiba narrowed his eyes. Godou noticed and then added, “When we worked together, we shared a woman. Sometimes all three of us had fun together. I know what he looks like when he has sex.”

Shiiba tried not to show any reaction, but he felt his face tightening.

“Don’t worry. It’s not like I had sex with him.” Godou smiled and stood up, then approached the door. “I’m going to confine you here for a while.”

“What did you say?” Shiiba gasped.

“It doesn’t mean anything,” Godou explained. “Think of it as a rite of passage in order to become mine. I’ll let you out in a few days. Bear with your hunger. There’s a bathroom here and plenty of drinking water. Just take it easy.”

He left the room. Shiiba heard the door being locked. It made him feel completely isolated from the outside world. As long as he had water, he could make it for a few days. The problem was whether or not he could get out.

But there was no use thinking about it. He had agreed to participate in Godou’s game. He gave up and sat down on the sofa.

As soon as he was alone, exhaustion hit him full-force. He leaned his head on the back of the sofa and looked up at the ceiling. He couldn't even sigh.

He couldn't sort out his feelings.

Why was he there?

Had he made the wrong decision?

He had followed Godou because he hadn't wanted to turn back, but was that really it? Or had he mistakenly thought this was the only choice?

Shiiba started to panic. Not only was his career as a detective in danger, he was also afraid because his freedom had been taken away. He had finally found the man who had killed Yukari, but if he wasn't careful, Godou might get away. If that happened then Shiiba wouldn't be able to protect Munechika.

But if he hadn't made a move, he would've regretted it for the rest of his life. When he thought of that, he felt trapped. He had been driven into a corner, and that was why he had parted with Munechika.

He had to punish the person who killed Yukari and he had to protect Munechika. He had thought killing Godou would accomplish both of those goals. If Godou had admitted the truth at Falsare, and if Kiri hadn't been there, he knew he would have shot the man.

The man who killed Yukari. The man who tried to kill Munechika. Wasn't it obvious that Godou should die? I have a right to take his life away. If the law won't do anything about it, I will.

That was what he had thought. But when Godou had said "You don't want to know the truth, you just want an excuse to kill me", he didn't know anymore.

He had felt as if Godou had looked into the bottom of his heart. He couldn't deny the grain of truth in those words, so he had been confused.

Shiiba had had a definite intent to kill Godou from the beginning. Even if Godou had denied his guilt, Shiiba initially had no intention of believing him. He had just wanted to carry out his goal. He had wanted to kill Godou and put an end to it all. He had wanted everything to be settled. He had been seized by that narrow viewpoint.

His desire to kill had taken charge and run wild. He would kill Godou because he wanted to. That reasoning was equal to cold-blooded murder. Just as Godou had said, no matter what the reason was, a crime was a crime. There was no difference in taking someone's life either for revenge or for pleasure.

As a human, Shiiba knew that not killing Godou had been the right thing to

do. He understood that. But he had still been prepared to exchange his life to fulfill his goal of shooting Godou. And now that he hadn't done that he was overwhelmed by a sense of frustration and defeat.

That scared him.

He had seriously tried to kill another person. He had stepped over the line and plunged headfirst into the deep darkness.

His heart started to relax. He lost his concentration and his consciousness diffused. He gradually didn't know what was going on, like he was wandering around in the middle of a deep darkness. His pride was destroyed and he couldn't gather it up again.

He took the pistol out of his coat pocket. For some reason he felt a sense of security at the cold sensation of the gun.

The pistol had an unrefined design, but it was a heavy SIG P229. He had spent two months' salary on it and had gotten it from a broker he had come into contact with many times before.

There were those inside the department who bought guns from their own S in order to find out information and to advance their own careers. Shiiba had never gotten involved with a set-up like that, but he understood the desperate feelings of his colleagues.

Nobody wanted to dirty their own hands. But sometimes there were situations you just couldn't avoid. When a person gets cornered, they'll do everything they can to protect themselves. Humans are weak creatures, so they tend to flow down the easiest paths.

Shiiba had been self-critical to the point where he became masochistic in nature.

Expectations from the higher-ups. Jealousy from colleagues. Information that could only be gathered by dirtying your hands. Every time he almost lost to those pressures, he just gritted his teeth and went on.

It was the same with Munechika. It was the first time he had met someone he could share everything with. He was so attracted to Munechika it was almost maddening. But he hadn't wanted his personal feelings to get in the way of doing his job. His heart had been split in two, but he still kept walking forward.

It wasn't that he knew where he was going or that he had a clear goal. But he just kept telling himself over and over again that he was almost there. But almost there...to where?

Maybe it was just Shiiba encouraging himself to not give up on life. But

now it felt like he couldn't go on. It felt like all he could do was crouch down in one place and rest. Now, he couldn't even bring himself to think that he was almost there.

Haven't I found enough?

If I ended everything, wouldn't I be at peace?

An almost irresistible temptation crept into Shiiba's heart.

I'm tired. I'm so tired, I don't want to think anymore.

I wish I could fall into a deep, deep sleep and never wake up.

Even though he didn't want to die, Shiiba unconsciously raised the gun. He released the safety and pulled down the hammer with his thumb. He opened his lips and put the muzzle into his mouth. The sensation of the cold, hard metal was very tempting. All he had to do was pull the trigger. If he did that, everything would be over. Everything would be nothingness.

Just then, as the taste of metal spread on his tongue, he felt a strong sense of *déjà vu*. He wondered what it was, then suddenly remembered...

The night he had first gone to Munechika's condo, Munechika had shown him his collection of model guns. Shiiba had licked one of Munechika's pistol to provoke him.

"Should I lick your Beretta like this, too?"

He remembered that that was what he had said. And then Munechika...

Shiiba automatically pulled the pistol from his mouth and smiled.

"Unfortunately, I'm not a Beretta, I'm a Magnum."

Shiiba remembered that he thought those words sounded like something a dirty old man would say.

What did he mean Magnum? Ridiculous.

He couldn't stop the laughter that burst out from him. He pushed one hand against his forehead. He realized he was laughing and crying at the same time.

It was no use. He couldn't end it, yet.

He had told Munechika he would be back and to wait for him. He could still hear Munechika's voice yelling out, trying to stop him at the hospital.

He couldn't betray Munechika. He couldn't break his promise to him.

No matter how painful things might be, they had promised they would be together. He had sworn that he would protect Munechika. So he had to keep his word.

Even if emptiness ate into his heart and he couldn't see the way out of the darkness.

Don't betray the man you've entrusted your heart and life to.

His cheeks remained wet as he continued to stare at the pistol he clutched in his hand.

He had overcome the urge to kill himself, but living in confinement was hell.

He could bear with his hunger. But the problem wasn't physical pain, it was his declining mental state.

If he moved around he would get tired, so he just sat still. The television and stereo wires were cut so he couldn't distract his mind with them. There were no windows in the basement room so he was cut off from all natural light and sounds, and he had no outside stimuli at all. It felt like no time passed at all under the bright fluorescent lights.



It was mental torture as he waited to be released.

He decided he wouldn't think about anything, but in fact he couldn't stop thinking. It was the first time Shiiba realized that humans naturally digested and retained everything they saw and heard. When you're in an environment with no stimuli, your consciousness turns inward and your ego becomes its food.

He was trapped inside of the jail of himself, and all he could do was let his mind wander. His racing thoughts acted like a word association game and he remembered things from his past that had been buried long ago. Every time he remembered something from his childhood, some word would revive another memory.

While he was doing this, he accidentally remembered the moment he found out that Yukari had died. He usually tried not to think about it, so he was surprised that it still felt so fresh in his mind.

He had met a friend at a café near the university. They had been sitting by the window in the very back of the café, where the early summer sun shone on them. It was Shiiba's reserved seat. After ordering coffee, his cell phone had rung.

“Masaki? It's me.” It had been Shinozuka's low voice.

He couldn't hear him clearly, so Shiiba had pressed his ear up against the phone.

“Oniisan? What's wrong?” Shiiba had answered in a cheerful voice. He was simply happy that Shinozuka had called him. Shinozuka had given him the cell phone three days earlier as a present for passing the test to become a government official.

“It's Yukari. Stay calm and listen to me.” A few seconds had passed before he had heard Shinozuka's voice again. His chest had tightened as he realized Shinozuka's voice was unusually tense. “Yukari was involved in an accident. She was taken to the hospital. Come to the hospital. But you don't need to hurry.”

Shiiba only understood what Shinozuka had meant by “you don't need to hurry” when he was rushing to the hospital morgue. Yukari had already breathed her last.

When he had seen her, a white cloth was over her face. The cool morgue was filled with the smell of incense. Shinozuka's face was pale. Shiiba couldn't believe this was real. He had just seen Yukari a few days ago. She had cooked him some food and smiled happily, telling him she was going for a check-up at

the doctor the next day.

She had lost her own life and the life of her five-month-old fetus. She was the wife of a bureaucrat, a pregnant woman, who had gotten caught in a gang dispute. She was shot to death, and the shocking incident had caused a stir. Shiiba had been under intense media scrutiny that he barely had time to grieve. During this time he had been given an offer from the police headquarters, and the tabloids even reported that he was on his way to becoming a career-track officer.

Shiiba had been tortured by so many powerful emotions. The anger towards whoever had killed Yukari. Annoyance towards the media who had hounded him out of curiosity. Distrust towards the police, who had accepted the confession of the person who wasn't responsible, in order to quickly put an end to things. But, the thing that tortured Shiiba most of all, was the strife that was borne between him and the person he had trusted most, Shinozuka.

"There's nothing I can do," Shinozuka had answered quietly when Shiiba had asked him if they could reopen the investigation.

Shiiba's mind wandered from Yukari's death to Shinozuka himself.

No matter what Shiiba said or how much he tried to probe, Shinozuka never told him how he felt. Shinozuka had cut off all emotions after losing his beloved wife and unborn baby. He had swallowed his hatred and anger, and was still able to smile. He didn't let anyone see his true feelings.

Shiiba longed for the strength Shinozuka had, but that kind of strength was just too sad.

Shiiba had Munechika. Even if it was painful, he had someone he could give his heart to. But Shinozuka didn't have anyone. He probably didn't want to rely or lean on anyone else.

Shiiba hoped that one day Shinozuka would find someone like that.

He had selfishly not wanted his brother-in-law to love anyone but Yukari, but he still couldn't help wishing for happiness for Shinozuka.

Life was too long to live alone. No matter how strong you were, you needed someone to share your burdens with down the long road ahead.

He wished he could have supported Shinozuka. It was only now that he realized that. If only he had understood Shinozuka sooner. If only he had opened his hardened heart and confronted his feelings head-on.

But Shiiba had met Munechika. And he had chosen to open up to Munechika instead.

At that moment, however, it was Shinozuka's calm voice that Shiiba

wanted to hear so badly. His heart was suddenly filled with a bittersweet affection for Shinozuka that he had never felt before.

Oniisan, what are you thinking about right now?

In Shiiba's mind, Shinozuka's gentle face kept smiling silently.

As Shiiba thought of Shinozuka, another flood of thoughts rushed in and slowly swallowed him up.

Chapter 3

Godou opened the door and came inside.

“Are you alive?” he asked.

Shiiba, still sitting on the sofa, looked at him.

Godou leaned against the doorway with his arms crossed and spoke to Shiiba as if he were calling a dog. “Stand up and come here.”

“Is it all right now?” Shiiba asked in a weak, strained voice.

“Yes. That was a rare experience, wasn’t it? It’s almost impossible to be completely alone in Japan nowadays.”

Shiiba wanted to complain, but it was too much trouble to speak. He was too exhausted to put up any effort. He dizzily followed Godou. Godou showed him to a room that looked like a hotel room. He was told to take a shower and change his clothes.

After washing for the first time in days, he changed into the clothes that had been left for him. Next he was taken to the dining room that was adjacent to the living room. It had a large window, and the view of the sandy beach and the lead-colored ocean spread out in front of his eyes.

The elderly man awaited him in the dining room.

“Master Shiiba, excuse me for not introducing myself sooner. I am Iwanaga. Please tell me if you need anything.”

Shiiba bowed his head slightly. Iwanaga bowed in return and brought in a tray with food on it. There was rice gruel, soup and yogurt.

“Since you’ve been fasting, you should just eat this today.”

Godou sat in the chair across from him and drank some coffee. Shiiba didn’t have an appetite, but quietly ate everything that was presented before him.

“I thought you were the kind of man who would respond more to not being able to do anything,” Godou said in an amused voice, as if he had just made a funny joke. “It seems I was right. Your face looks terrible. Your eyes look like they’re dead.”

“You don’t have to worry, I’ll come back to life soon,” Shiiba answered stubbornly.

But he still felt numb, and he couldn’t feel interested or concerned about anything. He wondered if he had slight post-traumatic stress disorder. He

looked at Godou, but didn't feel anything. It was as if he had forgotten the deep-seated hatred and resentment he felt for the man. That made Shiiba depressed.

He didn't think a few days of confinement would torture him that much. But he always had masochistic tendencies. It would take a bit of time for his mental health to get back to normal after being eroded by so much self-reflection.

"I hope you will," said Godou. "It's not very fun to see you like this. You're being obedient, but your eyes show your animosity. It would probably have been more enjoyable to put you in a stimulating situation where you didn't know if you'd be killed in your sleep."

Shiiba would have preferred that situation, but not to please Godou.

After eating, he moved to the sofa in the living room.

Godou returned Shiiba's cell phone, saying, "Call Munechika."

Shiiba had reached his hand out reflexively to take the phone back, but his hand stopped.

Godou grabbed Shiiba's hand and made him dial Munechika's number, telling him, "This is what I want you to say: 'We have to break up. I don't ever want to see you again.'"

Shiiba forgot to breathe as he stared at Godou, who sat down next to him.

"You're not a detective anymore, right?" Godou continued. "So you're finished using your S."

"Munechika isn't just my S," Shiiba retorted.

"I know. He's your precious Romeo. But in the story Shakespeare wrote, Romeo saw Juliet and thought she was dead, then foolishly drank poison and died. What will happen with you two? Will Munechika believe you or will he see through your lies to your true feelings?"

Godou was testing their relationship and playing with them.

"Now, call him. But you can't just say it. You have to say it like you mean it. If you don't...you know what will happen, don't you?"

Shiiba couldn't even call Godou a coward. Godou intended to thoroughly torture Munechika. And Shiiba had no choice but to comply.

Shiiba pressed the call button and brought the phone to his ear. Munechika was probably still in the hospital so Shiiba wasn't sure if the call would go through.

After ringing several times, Munechika answered the phone. "Shiiba?"

Shiiba felt a throbbing pain in his chest as he heard the urgency in Munechika's voice as he said his name. "W-where are you? Where are you calling from?"

"Munechika...I'm sorry," Shiiba whispered in a strained voice. All he could do was apologize.

"Come back," Munechika said. "Come back to me right now."

Shiiba looked at Godou as he listened to Munechika's voice. Godou was silently ordering him to make it quick.

"Munechika, I'm not coming back. I won't ever come back to you."

"Shiiba?"

"Forgive me. I...I have to break up with you. I won't ever see you again."

Shiiba was heartbroken as Munechika became silent. "If I keep being with you, it'll be too painful. I can't stand it anymore. I just want some relief from this. I want to be alone. So we have to break up."

"Shiiba, what's going on?" Munechika asked quietly.

"Nothing. I've been thinking about this for a while now and this is the decision I've come to. Just forget about me. I'm hanging up now."

"Wait, Shiiba! Don't hang up!"

Shiiba forced the cell phone away from his ear and hung up.

As Godou took the cell phone from his hand, it rang again. It was probably Munechika. Godou turned the phone off with a disinterested expression on his face.

"Are you satisfied now?" Shiiba whispered weakly.

Godou smiled. "Yes. He's lying in bed right now, stunned." He stood up from the sofa. "I'm going out for a bit, so you can do whatever you please. I'll come back tonight."

"Where's Kiri?"

"Over there." Shiiba followed Godou's gaze and saw Kiri out on the beach. "She loves the ocean. When she comes here she either stares at the ocean or falls asleep somewhere. Even though she usually works like she's possessed by something, when she's away from work she barely moves. She's an interesting woman. By the way, I heard you went to Yoshizawa Iron Works," Godou suddenly said in casual voice, as if he was trying to confirm a fact, not just digging around for information.

"Did Kiri tell you?" Shiiba asked in return.

Godou nodded silently. "She doesn't usually care for others, but she seems to have an interest in you."

Godou didn't ask why Shiiba had visited the ironworks. He had already guessed what Shiiba was thinking: Shiiba's instincts were telling him that Godou was behind the illegal firearms leak. But it didn't look like Godou cared one way or the other. Maybe he was relieved by the fact that Shiiba was no longer a detective or maybe he was looking down on the police force as a whole.

"How do you talk to Kiri?" Shiiba asked.

Godou shrugged, peered into the mirror that hung on the wall and pushed up his bangs. "I can understand what she wants to say by watching her gestures. When it's necessary she writes things down, but she has bad handwriting, so it's a pain to read it."

The possible ringleader of the illegal guns incident was right in front of Shiiba. But now he was no longer a detective, so that fact had nothing to do with him anymore.

Godou smiled in the mirror. "Go play with Kiri. If you're good while I'm gone, I'll tell you some stories about Munechika when I get back."

"I don't want to hear stories like that," Shiiba snapped.

He slipped past Godou and left the living room. He headed towards the entryway and went down to the beach. He walked along the shore still feeling irritated.

He wondered what Munechika felt during that phone call. He hoped Munechika realized that that wasn't how he truly felt. But if Munechika believed it, he was probably mad that he had been betrayed.

Even though Shiiba had done it to protect Munechika, he was mad at himself for not being able to avoid the false break-up. He was powerless in Godou's hands. Had he always been such a pathetic man? He didn't have the energy left to stand up to him.

It was hard to walk on the soft sand. He felt dizzy, perhaps because he had moved too quickly. And he was short of breath because he didn't have much physical strength left.

He stopped for a bit. As the cold, wet, salty breeze whipped around him, he looked up. He hadn't seen the sun in so long, the brightness hurt his eyes.

Several houses like Godou's faced the Shonan Sea, as if they were gazing at it. The villas that made up the scenery probably belonged to some very wealthy people.

Kiri was sitting on the beach, wearing a flannel shirt and faded jeans. Her bare, white feet were covered with sand.

“Aren’t you cold?” Shiiba asked as he squatted down beside her, but Kiri shook her head slightly.

She kept letting sand run through her fingers, over and over again. It looked like she enjoyed the feeling. It was like watching a little girl playing in a sandbox.

He watched Kiri for a while, but then he couldn’t keep quiet anymore—so he asked her, “Does your grandfather know you’re here?”

Kiri finally raised her face.

“I’m sure he’s worried if you left without saying anything,” Shiiba added.

He knew that she lived alone with her grandfather. Even though she might think he was meddling, if the old man didn’t know where she was, Yoshizawa would be worried to death.

Kiri wrote in the sand, “I told him.”

“Really? Your grandfather knows you’re with Godou?”

She nodded. Shiiba knitted his brows and fell silent.

Did Yoshizawa really approve of her relationship with Godou? He didn’t think someone who cherished Kiri so much would allow her to get into a relationship with a man like Godou.

Kiri tugged Shiiba’s shirt. It looked like she wanted to ask him something. “Shibano? Shiiba?”

When he had been at Yoshizawa’s place he had called himself Shibano, but Godou had called him Shiiba. Apparently she wanted to know his real name.

“When I’m working I call myself Shibano, but my real name is Shiiba.”

It felt strange to think that he would never use the name Akira Shibano again, the other name he had used for three years. What did the time he had spent as Shibano mean to him?

No matter how much progress he had made, he was never satisfied. He had been part of an organization he didn’t trust and was displeased with, and had immersed himself in his investigations to the point of exhaustion.

Even as he doubted that way of life, the reason he couldn’t quit being a cop was because he wanted to settle his personal grudge with criminals. He had thought that that wasn’t the only reason, but now he wasn’t sure of anything anymore.

After what had happened to Yukari, he had abandoned his hopes of becoming a career-track official and decided to face criminals head-on by becoming a non-career track cop. Maybe he had used his job as an excuse to

fight crime, and now that he knew Godou could possibly be responsible for Yukari's death, quitting the force was the obvious choice.

A quiet anger that flowed through his body like blood had been his motivation. Because of that motivation, he had kept on going and come to this point. If he had killed Godou, all that would have been left would be the ashes of his former self.

If he lost his anger, he would have nothing left.

When he thought how empty a person he was, he was seized by so much hopelessness that he felt like his legs had been pulled out from under him.

He distracted himself from his uneasiness and asked Kiri, "Do you like working with lathes?"

She quickly nodded.

He was jealous of her honesty. If someone had asked him if he liked being a detective, he had never responded like that. He had always believed it wasn't a matter of liking or disliking it.

But he had prayed for the day when he would be able to say he loved his job.

But that prayer had never been answered. He had lost both his pride and his job.

The feeling of emptiness inside him was relentless and beyond his control. He lay down on the sand and looked up. The clear, cloudless blue sky stretched out above him.

He thought that the ocean and the sky were beautiful, but the beauty didn't resonate with his feelings. The sharp sensation he felt made him depressed.

He looked up at the sky as if he was glaring at it. Kiri started to look up at the sky, too, as if wanting to see what he was looking at.

Shiiba gazed at her profile as she innocently looked up at the sky. What a strange girl, he thought.

She still looked wary, but vulnerable. She never became attached to others, but, in exchange, she was never afraid of others. Her body was so slender it looked like it would break, but he could feel strength from her core.

When he returned to the villa with Kiri, Iwanaga prepared some tea for them.

They were sitting on the sofa and drinking it when he heard a bird chirping from somewhere. There was a stylish bamboo bird cage hanging from a brass stand in the corner of the living room. It was delicately made and certainly didn't look like a birdcage, but a bird was inside of it.

Kiri opened the door of the bird cage and a small white bird came out. It looked like it was used to humans as it perched on her fingertip.

Kiri returned to the sofa and stared at the bird while softly stroking its head and chest with her finger. The bird didn't seem to mind at all. It narrowed its eyes with pleasure.

"Miss Kiri is very attached to it," Iwanaga said to Shiiba as he gathered up the tea cups.

"Is that a Java sparrow?" Shiiba asked. He thought the coloring was a little different than normal Java sparrows. It was pale yellow on the upper part of its head and its stomach.

"I think it might be a cream Java sparrow. About six months ago we found it injured in the yard. It just so happened that Miss Kiri was there at the time. She was so fond of it that we decided to keep it." Iwanaga gazed at Kiri affectionately for a while, and, after taking away the cups, he came back with a small wrapped package. "Miss Kiri, I have a present for you from Master Takanari."

Kiri put the bird on her shoulder and opened the package. It was a book.

Shiiba looked at one of the open pages and frowned. There were many pictures of different kinds of pistols on it. It seemed to be an illustrated encyclopedia of sorts. Kiri seemed thrilled by it as she stared at the picture of the anatomy of a gun.

"Are you interested in guns?" Shiiba asked after Iwanaga left. Kiri nodded. "Why?" he asked.

She wrote on his hand, "Because they're pretty."

It was a simple answer, but very convincing. Kiri worked with a lathe which could form metal at will. It wouldn't be strange for her to admire the unique form of a gun and think it beautiful.

So it was Kiri who was making the illegal guns that appeared on the market. Shiiba's instincts were telling him that.

"Kiri, Godou's using you. Are you making those because he told you to?"

Kiri shook her head at the question and wrote something on Shiiba's hand again. "I make them because I want to."

Maybe she was protecting Godou again, Shiiba thought, saddened. If Kiri was being used by Godou, he wanted to help her. But if she was brainwashed just like Motoaki, she wouldn't respond to reason.

Regardless, now that he was no longer a detective, he didn't have the power to save others. When he thought about it realistically, he realized he

had his hands full with his own problems.

A man's voice came from behind them, saying, "What, are you holding hands?"

Shiiba looked up. Munechika's half-brother, Motoaki Matsukura was standing in the doorway watching them. He was wearing a t-shirt and patting his stomach slowly. His hair was disheveled, and his face, which was full of piercings, looked tired. It looked like had just woken up.

"Are you trying to make a move on her while Godou's away? I'd stop if I were you, Shiiba. She's not sexy at all. Even if you ate her, she wouldn't taste very good." Motoaki smirked and plopped down on the couch next to Kiri as if he owned the place.

He was still in his mid-twenties, but he was already the boss of the Matsukura Group. Even if he was emotionally inexperienced and troublesome, he was a man with authority.

"What, Kiri, are you looking at another book about pistols?" Motoaki snatched the book out of Kiri's hands. He talked to her as if she were an idiot. "Well I guess without guns you'd have nothing left. You better hang on to them so Godou doesn't abandon you."

Kiri stared at Motoaki, expressionless. Her eyes were cold.

"What? If you got a problem speak up, you prude." He roughly grabbed Kiri's chin. The bird flapped its wings, surprised. Without hesitation, Kiri bit Motoaki's hand. "Damn it! You—!" He pushed her away and she fell to the floor. He raised his hand overhead and Shiiba quickly stood up and grabbed it.

"Don't be violent," Shiiba said.

"Shut up," Motoaki snapped. "Don't tell me what to do."

Motoaki shook off Shiiba's hand and turned his bloodshot eyes to the bird that rested on the back of the sofa. He quickly stretched out his hand and grabbed hold of it. He purposefully turned around to face Kiri. Shiiba had a bad feeling so he tried to stop him, but it was too late. Motoaki covered the bird with both hands, and they all heard a sharp, breaking sound.

"Hey!" Shiiba grabbed Motoaki's arm.

Motoaki sneered. He pushed the bird into Shiiba's hand. Its neck was probably broken because its warm body was relaxed and not breathing.

Motoaki looked at Kiri, who looked shocked, and smirked, satisfied. "I was sick and tired of it chirping all the time. Now it'll be quiet."

Kiri stood up and held out both hands to Shiiba. He handed the bird over.

She held the unmoving thing to her chest and left the living room.

Motoaki plopped down on the couch. “That’s what you get for irritating me.”

“Stop being so cruel,” Shiiba admonished, unable to contain his anger.

Motoaki surely knew how much Kiri loved that bird. He was stunned at Motoaki’s cruelty. Motoaki had killed a living creature like it was a toy.

“When did you get here?” Shiiba asked.

But Motoaki narrowed his eyes, looking bored. “What about you? Why are you here? Are you switching from Keigo to him?”

“That’s not it. I only came here because Godou asked me to.”

“So you’ll just come whenever you’re invited somewhere? Are you stupid? I thought you were a detective, but I guess you’re worse than a no-brained slut who’ll open her legs to anyone. Keigo wasn’t enough for you so you had to go to Godou?”

Apparently Motoaki didn’t know Shiiba had quit his job as a detective, yet.

“I have my own reasons,” Shiiba quietly replied.

Motoaki kicked the table. “What reasons? You just want a man. How low do you have to be, a detective who sleeps with yakuza to gather intelligence? I’ve never seen a whore like you.”

Shiiba didn’t feel angry even though he was being spoken to like that, probably because Munechika had told him about Motoaki’s past. Munechika had been involved with Motoaki’s mother and they had run away together. However, she had committed suicide. Shiiba was sure it had been a huge shock to the young Motoaki. He had been abandoned by the two people most important to him. He had grown up and moved to the head of a large organization with the wounds of betrayal that had never healed. He now faced incredible pressure and had a complex about being constantly compared to his older brother. When Shiiba thought about the pain Motoaki had gone through, he couldn’t bring himself to be angry.

“Motoaki.”

“Don’t say my name like that. I’m not some hoodlum around town. I’m a third generation Matsukura.”

Shiiba brushed off Motoaki’s complaint and continued, “Do you know? Godou’s the one who shot Munechika.”

Motoaki raised his eyebrow. “Huh? What are you talking about? Why would Godou be after Keigo? Some other yakuza idiot did it.”

“No. Godou hired someone to attack Munechika. He made a deal with me that if I became his, he wouldn’t touch Munechika anymore. That’s why I came here.”

After a short silence, Motoaki shook with laughter as if he had just heard a very funny joke.

“He tricked you,” Shiiba added. “Godou lied to you so you’d do what he wanted.”

Motoaki stopped laughing and opened his eyes wide, then he spat out hatefully, “You’re really stupid for a detective.”

Motoaki admired Godou too much, so anything Shiiba said would be useless. Motoaki was also very attached to Munechika. Deep in his heart, he was probably searching for his older brother in Godou.

“Motoaki, I checked this out,” Shiiba explained desperately. “Godou was behind the incident. If you think calmly about the timing and situation, you’ll understand he’s the only one who could have done it. He made you into a puppet that would do anything he wanted, and in doing so he’s blocking the Matsukura Group from making a move. He doesn’t want them in the way so he can keep buying out other groups. Sooner or later, Matsukura will be under Godou’s control, too.”

But the explanation didn’t get through to Motoaki. It just made him angrier. “Shut up. Don’t stick your butt into our world like you know what’s going on! Godou understands me more than anyone! I wouldn’t let someone use me.” He grabbed the book that was on top of the sofa and hurled it at Shiiba.

No matter how much Shiiba tried to warn him, he knew Motoaki trusted Godou and was blindly devoted to him. Shiiba had no choice but to just shut his mouth.

“Godou told me not to lay a hand on you. But if you keep this shit up, I won’t be able to hold myself back. I can’t stand looking at you!” Motoaki stood up in anger, opened the door with all his strength and left the room.

Chapter 4

Godou returned at about nine o'clock. He had two subordinates with him, but they soon retired to the back room of the mansion. Apparently they weren't allowed to wander around.

Shiiba returned to his room and took a shower. Godou called him from an extension phone and told him to join him for a drink.

Shiiba went downstairs and, as he approached the living room, he heard someone fighting so he stopped. He brought his ear close to the door and listened.

"Don't make me say it again," Motoaki was saying in an agitated voice. "I'm telling you, he's dangerous. He acts like he's all quiet, but he's a detective out to get us!"

"It doesn't matter if he knows," Godou said calmly.

"What are you talking about? What are you going to do with Kiri? Shiiba already knows about the guns."

"Probably."

"No, not probably! Come on, Godou. Stop this. Stop getting involved in such dangerous business deals."

"It's not business. It's my hobby."

"If you love guns so much, I'll use the plant in the Philippines. You can make as many guns there as you want. You don't need to leave everything to a kid like that."

"Motoaki, the thing that's the most important to me right now is putting the guns Kiri makes out on the market. They're the best. If I wanted to make a lot of money I'd sell mass-produced guns."

After a bit of silence, Motoaki said in a whining voice, "I don't understand you."

"You don't have to. I understand you, that's enough."

"What's enough? The thing with Kiri and now Shiiba? You're too selfish. Why don't you ever listen to my opinion?"

"I know that you're worried about me. When it comes down to it, all I have is you. You know that, right?"

Motoaki seemed calmed by Godou's words, as if all of his doubts had

vanished. Godou had cleverly plucked out all the seeds of distrust that had sprouted within the younger man and taken care of it.

It had grown quiet inside, so Shiiba knocked on the door. As soon as Motoaki saw Shiiba, he made an irritated face and sat down on the edge of the sofa.

Godou and Shiiba faced the window. Godou opened his white shirt a little and drank some brandy with a relaxed attitude. Then he looked like he suddenly remembered something and left the living room.

When he returned, he was holding a small box. “I got this today. Isn’t it beautiful?”

He set it on the table and Shiiba saw that it was a specimen box. He looked at the butterfly with its wings spread inside and his eyes widened.

It was a large butterfly with vivid blue wings. The color was a peculiar metallic blue. He had never seen such a beautiful butterfly before.

Godou traced his finger along the glass and quietly explained, “It inhabits Central and South America. It’s a Morpho butterfly, sometimes called the most beautiful butterfly in the world. Some people call it a living jewel or a flying jewel. It’s such a beautiful blue color, but interestingly enough, the wings itself aren’t blue. This butterfly’s scales have a complex structure that only reflect light from the blue wavelength. It has a structural color like a jewel beetle or the feathers of a peacock.”

Shiiba was fascinated by the beautiful wings, but he suddenly realized something. When he looked closely, there was something strange about the butterfly.

“It only has a head,” he said.

The butterfly’s abdomen was missing. That was why its wings had looked so much larger.

“Is this another one of your weird hobbies?” he added.

All the butterfly specimens he had seen at Godou’s condo only had one wing each. Godou had gone through the trouble of plucking one wing from each butterfly.

“I didn’t do it,” Godou answered. “I bought this from a specimen dealer. This butterfly has a lot of oil in its abdomen and when it dies the oil seeps out, which takes away the beauty of its wings. So when specimens of Morpho butterflies are collected, they’re usually scooped out from the head down.”

In order to preserve its beauty, it had to have its abdomen cut. It was a cruel story.

“That’s cruel,” Shiiba murmured to himself. “They weren’t born to please the eyes of humans.”

Godou immediately replied, “Really? I think this butterfly is happy. Butterflies have short lives, so now that it’s a specimen its beautiful figure can continue to exist. This butterfly eats disgusting things like liquid from rotten fruit and moisture from animal excretions. It eats dirty things and oil accumulates in its abdomen. It fascinates people with its beauty. If it didn’t have these scales, it would just be an ordinary moth with brown wings.” Godou leaned against the sofa and propped his elbow up. “I’m not interested in things that are just beautiful. I’m strongly attracted to things that are beautiful on the outside, but ugly and distorted on the inside. If you became a little more ugly on the inside, you’d be more beautiful, too.”

Shiiba had a bad feeling in his stomach.

“Get down on your knees and kiss my foot,” Godou calmly ordered as he uncrossed his legs.

Shiiba wrinkled his forehead. “Screw you.”

“You belong to me. You have no right to say no,” Godou said calmly. Shiiba gritted his teeth. No matter how ridiculous the request was, he had to obey. He got off the sofa and knelt on the ground. Godou held his right foot out to him. “Kiss my shoe.”

Motoaki sat up and glared at Shiiba with a stabbing look in his eyes.

“Come on,” Godou’s voice murmured. “Try to kiss the foot of the man you hate. I want you to feel humiliated.”



Shiiba held his breath and slowly lowered his head.

Godou's polished, expensive-looking shoe came closer to his face.

Shiiba tightened his lips and pushed them to the tip of the shoe.

The black flame inside of him flickered. It only happened for a moment. He willed the flame deeper inside of himself and shut it out. There was no meaning to this act. He turned off his emotions and answered all of Godou's requests.

“Your true self hasn’t returned yet, hmm?” Godou grabbed Shiiba’s chin and made him look up. “Even if you’re on a chain, don’t hide it. Don’t disappoint me.” Godou turned away from Shiiba and looked at Motoaki. “Motoaki, how long are you staying here? The guys from Matsukura don’t know where you are, right?”

“I’m keeping in contact every day,” Motoaki answered petulantly. “Ever since Keigo got shot, they’ve been hounding me. When I’m at home they even keep watch while I’m taking a piss. I can’t stand it.”

“Because you’re the boss. You can stay as long as you like, but don’t tell anyone about this place. It’s my special hiding place.” Godou gulped down his brandy and looked at Motoaki meaningfully. “I heard you killed the bird while Kiri was watching.”

“Yeah. What about it?” Motoaki looked back at Godou challengingly.

“Come here,” Godou ordered.

Motoaki scoffed. “What? You’re not going to make me kiss your shoe, too, are you? Get real.”

“Stand in front of me,” Godou commanded.

Motoaki stood sulkily in front of Godou. Godou slowly hugged Motoaki’s hips, bringing the younger man close.

“W-what are you—?” Motoaki stammered.

“You’re a bad boy,” said Godou. “You’re really a handful.”

Godou stroked Motoaki slowly and then dropped his hand into Motoaki’s pocket. When he brought it back out, he was gripping a silver butterfly knife. He quickly popped open the blade. Motoaki held his breath as Godou ran the blade over his wrist. Godou’s movements were smooth and without hesitation.

“Ugh!” A red line appeared on Motoaki’s palm and blood trickled down from it. Motoaki tried to pull his hand away, but Godou wouldn’t let him.

“When little boys are bad, they need to be punished,” Godou murmured in a gentle voice as he ran the knife over Motoaki’s hand again.

Motoaki's face turned pale as he saw the cross etched on his palm. He dropped to his knees. "Ahhh..."

Godou knelt down and put his arm around Motoaki. "Don't you feel better now that I've punished you, Motoaki?" he whispered as if he were hypnotizing Motoaki, gently stroking Motoaki's hair. "You were a bad boy and that's why you were abandoned. Left behind. You were probably so lonely, weren't you? I know you want to be a good boy. If you're a good boy, no one will ever leave you again. They won't treat you like you're in the way. But no matter how much you try, you can't be good. So when you're scolded, you feel like you've managed to be just a little bit good and you feel happy. I understand that. I'll scold you whenever you like. This pain is necessary."

Godou softly kissed Motoaki's forehead, put the knife on the floor and calmly left the room as if nothing had happened.

Motoaki clutched his bloody hand, bearing the pain. Shiiba looked around and picked up the cloth that had been on the table, folded it and wrapped it around Motoaki's hand. The cuts weren't deep, but since it was in the shape of a cross it didn't look like it would stop bleeding anytime soon.

"Put some antiseptic on it later," Shiiba advised.

"Leave me alone." Motoaki pushed Shiiba's hand away as he went back to the sofa. "Stop staring at me like that," he snapped, glaring with bloodshot eyes.

"Why are you with Godou?" Shiiba asked. "Doesn't it bother you that he treats you like that?"

Godou had just told Motoaki he had been abandoned because he had been a bad boy. No matter how you thought about it, Godou was definitely referring to when Munechika had run off with Motoaki's mother. Godou was controlling Motoaki by exploiting the wounds in his heart.

Motoaki scowled. "Shut up. I can do whatever I want! What about you? You're the fool here. I thought you had more of a backbone."

Shiiba couldn't help feeling sad for him. Motoaki was attacking others to forget his own feelings.

"I'd lick the bottom of Godou's shoes if it meant I could protect Munechika," Shiiba said seriously. He was surprised by his own words. He sounded like a loser. Then he realized something for the first time: no matter how humiliated he was, there was something more important to him than his pride. There was someone more important to him than himself. And that was

Munechika.

He had always been fighting for himself all this time. He had desperately tried to protect himself. But now he was fighting to protect Munechika.

A strong light returned to Shiiba's eyes.

Godou hadn't defeated him, yet. Even if he wasn't a detective anymore, he would take Godou head-on. He was finally able to decide on that course of action.

"Godou won't lay a hand on Keigo. Why don't you wake up and see that?" Motoaki said in an annoyed voice and turned his face away from Shiiba's.

"You're the one who needs to wake up." Shiiba stared at Motoaki's profile and said vehemently, "Motoaki, I'm going to fight Godou for what I believe in. No matter how unsightly or pathetic I look while I'm doing it, I won't lose to him. Don't run away. Fight. Go see Munechika and face your true feelings."

"Shut up!" Motoaki gripped his glass and threw it on the floor as hard as he could. Shards of glass exploded around them. "Who do you think you are? You're just some detective who was using Keigo. Stop acting like you're his lover. It makes me sick. If anyone finds out he's been cooperating with you, he's done for. Do you think getting your finger cut off isn't a big deal? If you really care about Keigo, you'll never get near him again."

What Motoaki was saying made sense. Until now, Shiiba had used Munechika. Looking back on it, he had given his body, but that wasn't just an excuse. He had wanted to have sex with Munechika. From the moment he had longed for Munechika, their relationship as just a detective and an S had failed. But Shiiba had thought that they would be able to make it, so they had continued on with their dangerous tightrope walk.

"Who are you to lecture me?" Motoaki said with an angry look on his face. "You have no business talking about Keigo and I!" He stood up just as his cell phone rang. He took it out of his pocket. He didn't move his left hand, which probably still hurt from getting cut. He looked a little restricted just working with one hand. "It's me. Oh, it's you, Tsuchii? What do you want? How am I supposed to know? Huh? I told you, I don't know! I'm only the boss in name, you know. Just take care of it. I won't be home for a while. What? Well just send someone else!"

Shiiba watched as Motoaki talked harshly on the phone. The young man was clearly impatient again. He moved forward without looking back on the things that were painful to him. He left the room still talking on the phone.

Shiiba felt suddenly sad. He stood up and went out to the terrace. He saw white waves cresting again and again in the dark sea. He felt the cold sea breeze on his face as he leaned against the wall. He saw something move from the corner of his eye. There was a spider web above his head. A moth was stuck in it. It was powerless, caught in the spider's thread.

No matter how much it struggled, it couldn't get away. It couldn't be free. Shiiba let out a dry laugh as he thought it was just like him and Motoaki.

The next day, Godou left again in the afternoon. It seemed he was attending to non-yakuza business. From some phone conversations he had overheard, Shiiba gathered that Godou owned a real estate and investment business.

When Godou left, Motoaki hopped in a black Fairlady Z and went off somewhere. Apparently he had driven from Tokyo to the villa by himself. It seemed likely that he had taken the chance to run away from home when he thought none of his underlings were around.

Munechika was an illegitimate child, but he was the oldest son. He was also the young head counselor of the Matsukura Group. Such an important member of the family had been shot, so the group must be having a rough time. Motoaki had run to Godou to escape reality. If this situation continued, Motoaki would lose his position as the boss of the group.

Shiiba wasn't being watched within the villa and he could move around as he pleased. No one stopped him if he went outside.

Just to see what would happen, he acted like he was going to walk down to the beach. He got pretty far from the villa with no one chasing after him, not even Iwanaga. If he felt like it, he could run away anytime. But he couldn't leave there yet.

He wanted to protect Munechika, but he had to find out the truth from Godou first. He wanted to hear the truth of the situation involving Yukari from Godou's own lips. If he didn't, he wouldn't be able to move forward.

After returning from the beach, he saw Kiri sleeping, curled up in a ball on the sofa in the living room. Her sleeping face looked innocent.

"Master Shiiba, is anything wrong?" a quiet voice asked as he watched Kiri sleeping from the hallway. He turned around and saw Iwanaga standing there. The old man was holding a blanket.

"No. Is that for Kiri?" he asked, looking at the blanket.

Iwanaga smiled, his eyes crinkling as he nodded. Shiiba moved away from the door and let Iwanaga into the room. The old man put the blanket over Kiri. It was like watching a grandfather fussing over his granddaughter.

Shiiba thought of Tokujuurop Yoshizawa and felt sad. He wondered if the old man knew Godou was using his granddaughter.

Iwanaga shut the door and returned to stand beside Shiiba. He softly said to Shiiba, "Miss Kiri loves that sofa."

"Have you been with Godou for a long time now, Iwanaga-san?" Shiiba asked.

"Yes. I've served him since he was a young boy."

It sounded like he knew Godou very well. Shiiba found it hard to believe that that disgusting man had once been an innocent child.

"Were you in the Togetsu Syndicate, then?" Shiiba asked.

"That's correct. Well, I wasn't a member, I was a servant. I worked at Master Takanari's uncle, Master Mitsunari's house. After I got older I was allowed to retire, but after Master Takanari returned from his stay overseas, he invited me to work here."

Shiiba sighed inwardly. The old man wasn't a regular employee after all. He couldn't understand Godou.

"If you have any questions, please ask me," Iwanaga said. "I'm sure I can answer anything you want to know about Master Takanari."

The words reminded Shiiba of Godou telling Motoaki he didn't care what Shiiba found out.

"I can ask you anything?" Shiiba asked.

"Yes, anything," Iwanaga answered, standing up straight.

"I've heard that Godou lived at his uncle's house, the Togetsu Syndicate. Why?"

After a pause, Iwanaga spoke. "Master Takanari's mother was Mistress Sayoko. His uncle, Master Mitsunari, was the boss of the group and was very fond of his younger sister. Mistress Sayoko was unmarried when she gave birth to Master Takanari. She was in poor health, so she stayed at the main house and raised Master Takanari there. He and Mistress Sayoko lived there under Master Mitsunari's protection until he turned eighteen. But after Mistress Sayoko passed away, he left the mansion and lived by himself."

Iwanaga explained everything without hesitation, and Shiiba didn't find anything strange in his story. However, something bothered him.

“But the boss had two sons, right? Did Godou get along with his cousins?”

Iwanaga’s expression changed slightly at Shiiba’s question. “No. Unfortunately, they didn’t have a very good relationship. Master Mitsunari doted on Master Takanari. His two sons were not fond of that fact.”

“What about Mitsunari’s wife?”

“She was the same. Master Mitsunari treasured Mistress Sayoko and her son so much, she resented them both. She was especially harsh to Master Takanari. Of course she was careful to do so outside of Master Mitsunari’s view.”

“So in other words, he was bullied behind Mitsunari’s back.”

Iwanaga nodded. “I can’t tell you more details about it since it’s a personal embarrassment of the family I serve, but I know Master Takanari went through some tough times. Master Mitsunari was often away from the house and Mistress Sayoko was locked up by herself, so all the attacks were directed towards Master Takanari. He never said anything because he didn’t want to cause trouble for his mother. He’s a very strong person.”

When he thought of Godou now, Shiiba couldn’t imagine the man not reacting to an attack. He couldn’t believe Godou would do that even for his mother.

“Why did his relationship with Mitsunari break down?” he asked.

“After all that happened, Master Takanari just wanted to get away from the house. So as soon as Mistress Sayoko passed away, he did so. No matter how many times Master Mitsunari reached out to him, he never came back.”

Shiiba could guess what kind of bad feelings Godou must have had about being brought up in that kind of environment, but he just wasn’t satisfied. There was something about Iwanaga’s explanation that he wasn’t entirely convinced of.

Yukari was killed because she had been caught in a dispute between the Togetsu Syndicate and the Koujin Association. But why had Godou gotten involved in his uncle’s dispute? Shiiba didn’t understand the motive. Munechika had said something before, but Shiiba couldn’t believe Godou would purposefully go after people from the Koujin Association just because he hated his uncle.

Shiiba had held so much conviction about Godou being the one responsible for the incident, but now his feelings wavered. Was it useless to dig up information about Godou? He could only get at the surface.

There was a reason Godou was such a cruel man. Maybe Shiiba needed to do a more thorough investigation to find out why. If he searched, maybe he would find it...

But he didn't know what he should do. He didn't know what move to make in this situation.

The truth was all inside Godou's heart. But even if Shiiba was right next to the man, he couldn't touch Godou's heart.

Shiiba clenched his hand in frustration.

Chapter 5

Godou returned home at night and gave Kiri a beautiful dress as a present. It looked as if it was from an expensive designer, but Shiiba didn't know much about fashion so he wasn't sure.

"Try it on," Godou suggested from his place on the sofa. Kiri began to change right there on the spot. She didn't seem to mind that there were others in the room. Shiiba didn't know where to look, so he turned his face away.

"Sit here." Godou patted his own knee and Kiri sat down obediently. "Aren't those kinds of clothes nice every once in a while? You look beautiful no matter what you wear."

Kiri didn't look happy or troubled. She just stared back at Godou with an expressionless look on her face.

Godou gently caressed her long hair as if Kiri was a doll he was fond of. It looked like they had a physical relationship, but the way he touched her wasn't sexual. It almost looked like he was soothing her. But no matter how many things he gave Kiri, they never had much effect on her. Godou dressed Kiri up for his own satisfaction.

"Don't you like it?" Godou asked.

Kiri nodded to show her appreciation, and Godou rested his head on her shoulder.

Motoaki entered the living room with a can of beer in his hand. "Playing dress-up again?" His steps looked unsteady, as if he had drunk quite a lot already. A white bandage was wrapped around his left hand. "Those clothes don't look good on a laborer like you. Take it off." He snickered and roughly tugged on Kiri's sleeve.

Kiri stood up and pushed Motoaki away. She didn't do it very strongly, but since he was drunk, he fell on his butt to the floor.

"You bitch!" he yelled.

"Motoaki, leave Kiri alone," Godou ordered. "Kiri, go to your room."

After Kiri left, Motoaki still sat on the floor, looking up at Godou suspiciously. "Godou, how long do you plan on keeping Shiiba here?" he asked in a sharp voice.

"Shiiba's my pet dog. If you don't like it, you can try to drive him out. But

you have to think of a way that won't force him out. He has to leave voluntarily." Godou poured some brandy in his glass. The amber liquid rolled over the ice cubes. He lifted the glass and took a sip, and then looked down at Motoaki. "Do you want to have sex with him?"

"What did you say?" Motoaki and Shiiba yelped, surprised. They stared at Godou.

"You can come with a man, too, can't you?" Godou said, his eyes filled with anticipation. "Don't you want to see what kind of man your brother has had sex with? Wouldn't that make you happy?" Shiiba and Motoaki exchanged glances. "Right, Shiiba? This will be the best test for you. This is a different kind of humiliation than kissing my shoe. Can you take it?"

Another test. In other words, Godou was testing how strong his feelings for Munechika were.

"If you can't, you can always run away," Godou taunted.

Shiiba didn't look away from Godou's gaze. The night Godou had coerced Shiiba into having sex with Munechika in front of Godou himself had deeply hurt Shiiba. It had made Shiiba distrust not only Godou, but also Munechika. Shiiba knew Munechika had hated it, even as he made that mortifying decision.

But this couldn't even compare to that. Having sex with Munechika was special to Shiiba. Anything else was just physical contact, so he could cut off all emotions—embarrassment, pleasure and pain—and bear it.

"I won't run away," he answered without hesitation. "I'll do whatever you tell me to do."

Godou nodded slightly. "Sounds good. Motoaki, play with him."

Motoaki reluctantly stood up and leaned over Shiiba. Shiiba didn't falter, but stared right back into Motoaki's dark eyes.

Motoaki roughly tore open Shiiba's shirt. The buttons flew off and Shiiba's bare chest was exposed.

"What, you're not scared? This is boring," Motoaki whispered in a low voice. His breath reeked of alcohol. "Don't tell me you're a prude like Kiri?" He smiled and grabbed Shiiba's necklace, drawing him closer. He wrenched his wrists up and wrapped the chain around Shiiba's neck. Shiiba strained against the pressure. "So how do you like to be fucked? Tell me. I'll do it however you want."

"...Brother," Shiiba said in a hoarse voice, and Motoaki said, "What did you say?"

“I said, ask your brother,” Shiiba said clearly, changing the subject to the problem between Motoaki and Munechika. “He knows everything about me. You’re brothers, so why don’t you call him up and ask him? If you’re serious, I’m sure Munechika will give you some tips.”

“You bastard.” Motoaki’s eyes widened as he forced Shiiba up with his necklace. Shiiba’s body floated for a second, but the necklace couldn’t stand his weight and it snapped.

“Motoaki, who’s the most important person to you?” Shiiba murmured.

“Shut up! Stop saying the same things over and over again like some idiot.” Motoaki turned around and yelled, “Godou! How am I supposed to get hard with this bastard?”

“Make him suck on it,” Godou suggested. “I want to see Shiiba violating you.”

“No thanks.” Motoaki gazed at Godou with sharp eyes. “I’ll cut him with my knife, but I’m not gonna have sex with him for your enjoyment. Don’t make a fool out of me, too,” he spat, and left the living room.

“Oh, I’m sooo disappointed,” Shiiba said coldly.

“That man...” Godou said, smiling. “I thought it was so cute how he’d snap at anyone, but he needs to learn who his owner is.”

Shiiba gazed at Godou as the man drank his brandy.

“What? Do you want to say something?” Godou prompted.

“What is your relationship with Kiri?” Shiiba asked.

“You’re really interested in her, aren’t you?” Godou questioned back. “Why don’t you try having sex with her?”

This again? Shiiba thought and sighed loudly.

“Some things can’t be understood by just looking at them. You’re not a coward, but you have the personality where you can’t go forward unless you’re sure of something. You’re too serious, but I’m sure you know that already.”

“Is it that fun to take off a man’s clothes?”

Godou smiled slightly and pushed back his bangs. “If you think it’s unfair that I’m peeling off layers of yours, why don’t you try to take off my clothes? I’ve almost got you naked now.”

“You think I’d ever let you see me naked again?”

Godou tilted his head and smiled, throwing him a meaningful look. “You’re like a beast on a chain, always on edge. You have wild instincts, but you live

your life acting like a loyal dog. You're afraid to rip the chain off. Even though you know it would come off if you just bit through it, you stop yourself because you know you're not supposed to."

"What you're saying is too abstract," Shiiba complained. "Can't you say it in simpler terms?"

"There's a conflict constantly fighting inside of you," Godou continued. "Sense and instinct. Wild and calm. Love and hate. Trust and distrust. True feelings and excuses. A yielding heart and a careless heart. I can't believe you haven't gone crazy. Is it because you're strong? No. The reason you can hold on to your sanity is because you're warped. You're sick."

"Don't compare me to yourself," Shiiba snapped. "I'm not a perfect person, but at least I'm sane."

"Would a sane person try to shoot and kill someone else? Shiiba, is Munechika that important to you?" Shiiba tensed up as Godou brought up Munechika again. "Is it because he helped your investigation? Or because you love him? And don't be greedy and say 'both.'"

Shiiba evaded Godou's mean-spirited question. "Unfortunately I'm a greedy person, so I want all of him to myself. I wouldn't even give a fragment of him to you."

Shiiba had vowed he wouldn't love Munechika.

As long as he was a detective, he had vowed he wouldn't love Munechika.

But now it was meaningless to be that cautious. He had already crossed that line.

"I can understand why you're attracted to Munechika," Godou mused. "I was, too. He bargains, but he's never calculating. He might hide his true feelings, but he doesn't lie. He's heartless while still having deep feelings. He's so complex, but he's not dragged down by negative feelings. He's in between light and darkness, but he never wavers between the two. People like him are rare. Usually people would choose one or the other. That's why I wanted him and got him."

"But he ran away from you, didn't he?" Shiiba said, glaring. But Godou just smiled. Shiiba wanted to see him get angry. He wanted Godou to take off his mask so Shiiba could see Godou's true feelings. "I bet you were frustrated when he ran away. You probably hate him so much because he wouldn't do what you wanted him to do. So that's why you won over Motoaki and are

trying to get even with Munechika. Am I wrong?"

He wasn't sure if Godou was angry, but the man cleared his throat and kept smiling.

"Keep it coming," Godou said. "I want you to make me feel like Munechika does when you invite him to bed. If you can make me hard, I'll tell you the truth you want to know."

Shiiba understood that Godou was speaking figuratively, but it actually felt like they were in bed and bargaining. He wasn't sexually excited, but he felt moved by Godou's gaze and voice.

"You said I'm warped, but what about you?" Shiiba continued. "From my point of view, you're crazy. You're completely screwed in the head."

"I agree," said Godou. "I am crazy. I know that. I was born a one-winged butterfly."

A one-winged butterfly. Shiiba thought of the eerie specimen of the butterfly with its wing spread out.

"One-winged butterflies long to be like other butterflies with both wings, because they have something one-winged butterflies lack. But even though one-winged butterflies long for them, they're jealous of those butterflies with two wings. They're so jealous of how beautiful the other butterflies look when they fly around." Godou drank the last of his brandy and looked at Shiiba with his dark eyes. "I was cursed by my own fate when I was born. I crawled on the bare earth. I looked up at the sky and prayed so much for my other wing to grow it almost made me crazy. But my wish never came true and my hopelessness only grew deeper. But then when I became an adult, I realized there was no reason for me to change. Now I grab the butterflies that fly elegantly in front of me, pluck off one of their wings and make them look like me. It calms me. I just surround myself with one-winged butterflies like myself."

Shiiba grew suspicious. Godou said he was born a one-winged butterfly, but he was good-looking and had money and authority, but still he had such a deep-seated complex? He wondered if it had something to do with Godou's life at Mitsunari Godou's house.

"I think you're a one-winged butterfly, too," Godou continued. "You long for your missing wing and you walk the earth holding on to your hatred of the one who stole it. I can understand your pain. I'm sure you just want to be free. You're already pushing your limit at whatever binds you, aren't you? Then just

throw away your past. Become a chrysalis again and be reborn anew. If that's what you want, it's not impossible. I'm the same way. I threw away everything and for the first time I was free. You just have to live how you want, regardless of common sense and morals and conventions."

Shiiba sat there listening to Godou's words and hypnotic voice. He felt as if he was being caught up in them, as if Godou was putting a spell on him.

"It's painful to face yourself," Godou went on. "But as soon as you know the problem, you can think of a way to solve it. If you turn away from the things you don't want to see, nothing will change. You need to be more honest with yourself."

"Enough," Shiiba interrupted him. "I've heard enough." It felt like he was getting advice from a counselor or something. He couldn't stand Godou telling him how he should feel.

"You don't have to be so scared of me," said Godou. "I want to know more about you. We're alike in so many ways. I want to strip you naked and look inside of you. I want to know what your blood tastes like. I'm sure it tastes the same as mine."

Shiiba wouldn't be surprised if Godou drank his own blood. He got goosebumps as the image of the man drinking blood flashed into his head.

"If you really want to know more about me," Shiiba said, "then tell me about yourself first. I heard you were bullied by your cousins and your aunt at your uncle's house."

"Did Iwanaga tell you that?" Godou asked.

"Yeah," said Shiiba, "he said you didn't have a very happy childhood."

It might be a topic he shouldn't dwell on, but Shiiba brought it up anyway. He couldn't avoid asking Godou about his past if he really wanted to expose the man.

"I wouldn't say it was unhappy," Godou replied. "My uncle loved me and my mother doted on me. I just had an equal amount of resentment poured on me."

"But you had a falling out with your uncle, right?" Shiiba persisted.

"Yeah," Godou answered. "Hatred isn't the only thing that drives people. Sometimes blind devotion and love can be just as vicious."

"How did your mom die?" Shiiba asked casually, holding his breath for the answer. "Was she sick?"

Godou smiled. It wasn't his usual smile; it was a maniacal, creepy smile. "I killed my mother," he answered in a sing-song voice.

Shiiba's heart raced. He might have just opened Pandora's Box. He felt fear rise up in his chest.

"Why?" he asked in a hoarse voice. "Why would you kill your own mother?"

Godou handed him a glass full of alcohol. "Drink. This story is hard to hear when you're sober."

Shiiba took the glass and Godou slowly began to talk. "My mother gave birth to me when she was eighteen. She wasn't married. She was a beautiful woman. She was so beautiful, she didn't seem human. Sometimes her beauty gave me the chills."

A woman so beautiful she gave you chills. Shiiba couldn't imagine anyone being that beautiful.

"She was a beautiful woman, but she wasn't right in the head. She wasn't a psychopath or anything. She was normal except for one thing."

Shiiba frowned, not understanding what Godou meant. "One thing? What was that?"

"My mother loved me, but her love wasn't normal. Do you remember the

first time you came?"

Shiiba was confused at the sudden change in topic. It must have been a rhetorical question, because Godou continued without waiting for his answer. "Normally it happens when you have a wet dream or when you're touching yourself, right? But in my case, the first time I ejaculated was inside my mother's mouth."

At first Shiiba didn't understand what Godou had said. But as soon as it sunk in, he felt sick. "You mean sexual abuse?" he asked.

"I suppose it would be called that nowadays," Godou said. "But my mother wasn't trying to abuse me and I didn't think I was being abused. But I was afraid of my mother's strange love. Her behavior escalated, and by the time I was in high school, she would be on top of me naked."

The hair on Shiiba neck stood on end. A mother desired her son sexually. There was nothing more terrible for a child.

Godou went on. "Even though she was crazy, she was the only mother I had. So I put up with it, even though I felt like I would go mad. I knew it wouldn't be long before I actually went crazy. I knew I had to leave that house. I decided to go to college and leave my uncle's house. I thought my mother would be against it, but surprisingly she was happy for me. I was so relieved that I would finally be free. But that wasn't to be. My mother needed someone else to give that love to. On the day I told her my decision, she put her hand on her stomach and smiled and said to me, 'Make sure you come home often. I know our baby will want to see its Daddy's face.'"

Godou's words sent a tremor of shock through Shiiba. A mother had become pregnant with her son's child. It was something that was never supposed to happen.

"I went to my uncle's room and came back with a katana. I stabbed her in the stomach again and again and destroyed the child inside of her. My uncle covered up the incident. I've never been back to his house since."

Shiiba was so shocked he couldn't respond. He wondered what had gone through Godou's mind while he killed his mother. Anger, disgust, fear? Or sadness?

"So how did you like my stripping?" Godou asked. "Now it's your turn."

"That's a hard act to follow," Shiiba murmured.

Godou laughed and sipped his brandy.

Shiiba left the living room, dazed. He returned to his own room and sat

down on the bed, annoyed. Godou was a dangerous man. He realized that once more. It was not normal to be able to laugh and joke after a terrible story like that. It wasn't a show of strength. Godou had admitted he was somewhat crazy. Even though he was crazy, he was also cunning. There was no way in. His fear was preventing him from getting inside of Godou.

He didn't want to admit it, but Shiiba was afraid of Godou. Even though he didn't think he would be brainwashed like Motoaki, there were moments when he felt swayed by Godou's strange power.

It wasn't his brain, but his instincts that warned him—warned him not to go any deeper into that man's bottomless pit of a heart. He would be pulled down by its force and there would be no turning back.

He didn't have the power to draw the truth out of Godou. His own incompetence made him angry and drove him crazy. The truth was right there, but he couldn't grasp it. He could only dip his finger in and look at some bits of it. But he knew giving up wasn't an option.

Just before dawn, the sound of strong rain woke Shiiba up.

He listened to the sound of the rain as he lay in bed for a while. But he wasn't tired anymore. He left his room and headed for the living room.

Light poured through a slight crack in the door. He peeked inside to see if anyone was there.

It was Godou and Kiri. He was lying on the sofa with his head on her lap.

She still wore the dress he had given her and stroked Godou's hair gently, over and over again. Godou looked peaceful and had a satisfied expression on his face.

"Want me to buy you a new bird?" he asked gently. "If you want me to, I'll find a bird that looks exactly like the one that died."

Kiri shook her head as if to say it was okay, and stroked Godou's cheek.

Godou grasped Kiri's hand. He put his hand over her small one and their fingers intertwined.

Godou stared at their hands for a while and then slowly brought them up to his mouth and kissed Kiri's fingers.

The room was filled only with the sound of rain as the two spoke without words. They didn't have to exchange words to get their feelings across. It was a gentle scene. It was a world that belonged only to the two of them. A world Shiiba couldn't enter. He had seen something he wasn't supposed to and felt a pang in his chest.

Godou was unexpectedly gentle to Kiri. Maybe he had let Kiri stay at his

villa to give her a break.

Their bonds were deeper than Shiiba had imagined. If they truly loved each other, Shiiba would just be interfering by wanting to save her from him.

The more he thought about it, the more confused he became about what was right and what was wrong.

He had thought Godou was an inhuman demon. But now that he had learned of his past and caught a glimpse of the darkness in his heart, it was hard to look at him from a simple point of view.

Reality wasn't like a fairytale where good and evil was black and white.

"Kiri and I are returning to Tokyo tomorrow, what do you want to do?" Godou asked as he was about to leave the next day.

"Did you tell the man after Munechika to stop?" Shiiba asked in return.

Godou smiled meaningfully and said provocatively, "If you want to continue the game with me, come to my condo in Ebisu. You'll be welcomed there. We can't end the game yet, right? So we have to keep playing. The best part is coming up." And then he left.

Even after observing him up close and learning about his past, it was still hard to understand Godou. He had allowed a man who had tried to kill him stay in his house unsupervised. Shiiba knew Godou was a smart man, but he was so inconsistent that Shiiba couldn't understand him.



Shiiba looked over at the sofa. Kiri was sleeping on it, curled up like a cat. As he looked at her sleeping face, he wondered what he should do. Motoaki came in just then. He was wearing a suit with no necktie.

“Are you leaving?” Shiiba asked.

Motoaki held up his car keys. “Going on a drive. Come with me,” he ordered.

But Shiiba shook his head. “Don’t feel like it. Go by yourself.”

“Stop complaining,” Motoaki said in an irritated voice, and grabbed Shiiba’s arm. “Just shut up and come with me.”

He dragged Shiiba outside, under the rain, and over to the Fairlady Z. Shiiba gave up, going along with Motoaki’s childish whims and getting in the passenger seat.

Motoaki chewed on his gum as he put on his seat belt and stepped so hard on the gas that the tires squealed. It was so sudden that Shiiba’s body slammed against the seat.

“Hey, slow down,” he yelled.

“What, are you scared?” Motoaki taunted.

Motoaki drove recklessly, but his technique was good. As soon as Shiiba realized that Motoaki knew what he was doing, he just looked at the scenery through the window.

As he gazed at the Sagami Bay, hazy in the rain, they continued south. At first they listened to hard rock music, then Motoaki switched from CD to radio and quiet piano music filled the car.

“Should I stop the car so we can have sex?” Motoaki suddenly asked.

Shiiba couldn’t tell if he was serious or joking. “I thought you couldn’t get hard with me,” he said casually.

Motoaki smiled. “Maybe I could if I took a sex drug.”

“If you have to go to that much trouble, it’s not worth it,” Shiiba said lightly, now knowing that Motoaki was just teasing him. “Are you that pent up?”

“Yeah, I am,” Motoaki agreed. “I’m too pent up. I feel like I’m gonna explode.”

Shiiba knew Motoaki had meant to sound like he was joking, but his last sentence sounded serious. Maybe it was his heart that felt like it would explode. Maybe he felt overwhelmed by the pressure of being the boss of the Matsukura Group.

“Okay, let’s not have sex,” Motoaki suddenly said. “Let’s continue where we left off last time.”

Shiiba looked at him suspiciously, and Motoaki smiled and pointed to his ear. He played with his silver earring.

“Piercing,” Motoaki clarified. “I’ll pierce you all over. Your ears, nose, tongue. Your other nipple and your bellybutton. And your...special place, too.”

Shiiba remembered how painful it had been when Motoaki had pierced him with an ice pick. The wound on his left nipple still hadn’t healed completely.

“No, thanks,” he said coldly. “I don’t enjoy hurting myself like you do.”

Motoaki’s lips tightened. “When you act like that, it makes me want to stick needles all over you until your whole body bleeds.”

“Do you hate me because I’m close to Munechika?” Shiiba asked. “If he’s that important to you, why don’t you just face him? He’s worried about you. Why don’t you just—”

“Shut up!” Motoaki punched Shiiba in the chest, knocking the wind out of him. “I told you to keep your mouth shut about me and Keigo. What do you know about us?”

Shiiba coughed and held his chest. “Maybe nothing. But I do know how Munechika feels. He regrets hurting you. And he wants to fix his relationship with you. I know you were in pain, but so was Munechika. Please forgive him.” He almost felt like smiling after he was done speaking. Why was he being so self-important? He was the same as Munechika. He couldn’t run away from the past. He wanted to be free, but he was consumed with burning anger and hatred.

He knew how much Munechika was in pain, so he selfishly asked Motoaki to forgive Munechika. But if Godou was the one who killed Yukari and the man apologized for his past mistakes, would Shiiba be able to forgive him? Could he change his heart?

Punishment was necessary. Or was it atonement? Why did those who had had things taken from them forget their hatred, and why did those that had taken things away released from hatred?

The Fairlady Z kept its speed. Heavy silence continued as the car took a left and got onto the Miura Juken Road from the toll road and continued on to Yokohama Yokosuka Highway.

Shiiba had thought they were going back to Godou’s place, but this new turn made him suspicious. “Why didn’t you take that exit?”

“We’re not going back to the villa,” Motoaki answered seriously, still facing ahead.

“Why not? Where are we going?”

“We’re going back to Tokyo.”

Shiiba was shocked. “Then go back yourself! I can’t run away from Godou. I told you, I made a deal to keep Munechika—”

“Shut up! I’m tired of hearing it,” Motoaki interrupted him sharply. He bit his lips in annoyance. “If you really want to protect Keigo, you don’t have time to be Godou’s toy and play the tragic heroine. Why don’t you have the guts to stick by Keigo?”

“So you believe me?” Shiiba asked.

It sounded like Motoaki had accepted his story for the first time.

“I’m not saying I believe you,” Motoaki said. “But if by chance Godou is really trying to kill Keigo, I have an idea. But just come with me for now. Whenever you’re with Godou, I get so annoyed I want to kill you. He won’t think you’ve run away if I’m dragging you around.”

Shiiba wasn’t sure why, but Motoaki was evidently trying to disobey Godou.

The seeds of distrust that Shiiba had planted inside Motoaki had started to grow.

Chapter 6

Motoaki's house, that is, the Matsukura mansion, was near Meijiro in the high-class residential district of Shimoochai. It was a traditional Japanese house surrounded by a high brick wall equipped with surveillance cameras.

Shiiba followed Motoaki inside just as a man rushed out from the back of the house.

"Motoaki-san! You're finally home. You missed an important meeting yesterday."

"Oh, is that so?" Motoaki said, playing dumb. "I totally forgot."

The man sighed loudly. "Please take some responsibility. We can take care of the organization, but you're the face of the Matsukura Group."

"That's enough, Tsuchii. It's over, there's nothing I can do about it now. I'm sick of your complaints. Come on." Motoaki grasped Shiiba's arm.

"Who is this?" Tsuchii asked.

"My friend. We'll be in the west room. Don't let anyone go there. We're going in there to have some fun alone."

Motoaki smiled as the man fell silent and tightened his lips. Shiiba saw contempt and resignation in the man's eyes as he watched Motoaki take him away. Tsuchii probably didn't know what to do with his willful boss.

Motoaki brought Shiiba to a spacious Western-style room and ordered him to sit down on an expensive-looking sofa. Motoaki picked up an extension phone and said, "Bring me the mahogany box from my room. The one on my desk."

After a while there was a knock on the door and a young man came in holding a small wooden box.

"Leave it on the table," Motoaki ordered.

The man left and Motoaki opened the box. Inside was a nylon bag filled with packages of various types of earrings.

Motoaki rummaged around in it and took out a piercing needle, a small hoop earring and antiseptic. "I'll start with your ear. Stay still. Or if it excites you more to have someone hold you down like last time, just say so."

Shiiba realized the young man was actually serious about piercing him and began to feel annoyed. But he didn't try to resist.

Motoaki sat down next to him. He sterilized Shiiba's ear, the needle, the earring and even his hand. Then he put some kind of ointment on the needle. It seemed like he wasn't going to be reckless like he had been before.

He pushed the tip of the needle and started talking quietly, focusing his attention on Shiiba's ear. "You told me to forgive Keigo. Did he tell you what happened?" It was the first time Motoaki had brought up the subject of his past.

"Yes, all of it."

"Did Keigo really say he wanted to fix our relationship? I'm gonna pierce you now."

A sharp pain raced through Shiiba's earlobe that made him grit his teeth. Motoaki ran the needle all the way through then inserted the earring. He looked at Shiiba's grimacing face, satisfied. Then he took out another earring.

"Only one is boring," he said, "so I'll do about three."

He sterilized everything again and stuck the needle in next to the other earring.

"He feels very guilty about taking your mother away," Shiiba said as casually as possible so as not to startle Motoaki.

Motoaki smiled sarcastically. "If he regrets it, why'd he run off with her in the first place? I remember it well. Our dad beat the shit out of him. I was afraid of my dad when I was little, but that made me even more scared." After finishing with the second piercing, he continued on to the third one. "I was so scared because I didn't know what had happened. When my mom left with Keigo, I asked everyone where they went, but no one would tell me the truth. My mom was scared of my dad and Keigo hated him, so I thought they had gone away to escape him. I didn't understand why they left me behind and I cried every day. I believed in my heart that if I was a good boy, they'd come back to get me. But two months later, the only thing that came back was my mother's dead body."

The needle passed through Shiiba's ear for the third time and Motoaki put another earring in. The ear throbbed painfully. But Motoaki was making a more painful face than Shiiba.

"I learned the truth at my mother's funeral. I heard my father talking. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe my half-brother had run away with my mother and in the end only she had committed suicide."

After finishing the third piercing, Motoaki fell back on the sofa as if he were

exhausted. Shiiba touched the piercings and looked at Motoaki.

“Munechika didn’t come home?” Shiiba asked.

“Nope,” Motoaki replied. “I saw him once after the funeral when I made a delivery to Kaname. He apologized to me, but I didn’t want to hear it. I kept saying, ‘Give me back my mother, you murderer!’ Keigo severed all ties with the Matsukura Group and disappeared. He’d call occasionally. Every time he did I would tell him to stop running away and pay for his crimes.”

Motoaki had probably been in pain, but so had Munechika. But that was all Motoaki could have done.

“After Dad died, Keigo accepted my invitation to return to the Matsukura Group, but we still had a complicated relationship. He was in charge of our front company and made us a lot of money. But money as atonement didn’t make me happy. Ten years have passed since Mom died, but I still can’t forgive Keigo. I’m surprised at how stubborn I am.” Motoaki was speaking honestly about his feelings. Maybe after finding out that Shiiba knew the circumstances, it was easier for him to talk about it.

“Haven’t you already forgiven him?” Shiiba asked. “If you really hate him, you wouldn’t even want to see his face.”

“No,” Motoaki answered. “I’m twisted, so I want to torture him by being with him.”

Shiiba didn’t believe him. Motoaki wasn’t being willful towards Munechika because he was punishing his brother. It was the opposite. He wanted so badly for their relationship as brothers to be back, but he was frustrated when he couldn’t get what he wanted. It was like a child who would throw a tantrum to get his parents’ attention.

Motoaki grinned. “Where should I pierce you next? Your tongue? Nipple? Or your bellybutton?”

“Like I have a choice,” Shiiba said dryly.

“Then I’ll decide,” said Motoaki. “How about your bellybutton? Take off your shirt.”

Shiiba sighed and started to unbutton his shirt.

Motoaki suddenly looked towards the door suspiciously. “What is that?”

They heard quarreling voices out in the hallway. The door suddenly opened and a very unexpected person appeared.

“Keigo...” Motoaki whispered, shocked.

Munechika stood in the doorway.

Shiiba opened his eyes wide and froze.

Munechika stepped into the room. Kaname, wearing his usual Mao suit and with his hair tied back, was behind Munechika.

“Wait, Keigo-san!” One of Motoaki’s men tried to keep him back, but Munechika roughly shook him off.

“Keigo!” Motoaki shouted. “Did you escape the hospital?”

Munechika didn’t answer Motoaki’s question. He grabbed Shiiba’s arm and forced him up. He glanced at the needles and earrings scattered on the table and reached out his hand to Shiiba’s right ear. “Is it just these? Nothing else?” he asked in a quick, low voice. Shiiba shook his head. “You’re not hurt? Did Godou do anything to you?”

“No, nothing, I’m fine,” Shiiba answered.

Munechika gave a sigh of relief, then said, “Let’s go. Come on.”

Motoaki jumped in front of Munechika. His face was pale and his eyes glittered dangerously. “Wait, Keigo! He’s my guest. You can’t just take him away.”

“I don’t need your permission,” Munechika said coldly. “He’s mine, Motoaki. I won’t forgive you if you do anything else to hurt Shiiba.”

Motoaki’s face changed. He glared back angrily. “Is he that important to you?”

“Yes,” Munechika answered quietly.

“He’s a detective!” Motoaki yelled. “Don’t you know choosing him means betraying the organization?”

“I know,” Munechika answered. “I’m prepared for that.”

“Hey!” Motoaki called to one of his men. “Get Keigo out of here. And Kaname, too.”

His men looked at each other hesitantly, not moving right away.

“What are you waiting for? Do it!” Motoaki yelled, and one of his men stepped forward, but suddenly someone else appeared in the doorway.

It was Tsuchii.

“That’s enough,” Tsuchii ordered. “Get back. Motoaki-san, why don’t you grow up? If you keep this up, the Matsukura Group will be ruined. Your predecessors who trusted you are rolling around in their graves right now!”

Motoaki’s face went red. “Shut up!” he yelled. “Don’t tell me what to do! Stop making a fool out of me! You all look down on me anyway!” He quickly took the butterfly knife out of his pocket. He flicked open the blade and thrust

it at Shiiba. “Keigo, if you don’t want me to hurt him, get out of here. This is my house. I’m the master here. You’re the one who left this place. You have no right to be arrogant now.”

Motoaki was so agitated that his men didn’t know what to do. Shiiba carefully watched his movements.

“Leave!” Motoaki yelled. “Get out of my sight!”

Shiiba didn’t feel afraid of the knife pointed at him. It was more painful to watch Motoaki desperately threatening Munechika. The person the young man longed for the most had come all the way there, injured, and, right in front of Motoaki, had reached out to another man. To add insult to injury, this was Motoaki’s own house, but no one was taking his side.

Munechika gave Motoaki a stern look and slowly took a step closer to him. Even though it was Motoaki who was supposedly threatening Munechika, it started to feel like the opposite.

“Motoaki, put the knife down.”

Munechika got closer and closer. Motoaki shoved the tip of the knife to Shiiba’s cheek.

“MOTOAKI!!!” Munechika screamed in a thunderous voice.

Motoaki reflexively jumped. Taking that opportunity, Shiiba swung his body around so that the knife couldn’t reach him. He wasn’t sure what Motoaki was thinking, but the young man suddenly turned the knife on himself.

“Stop moving!” Motoaki shouted. “If you come near me, I’ll kill myself!”

He seemed more disturbed than ever, as if he had completely lost it. His hand was causing the knife to tremble against his throat.

Everyone froze except for Munechika, who kept walking towards Motoaki.

“Go away, Keigo! I’m serious! I’ll stab myself!”

Munechika didn’t take his eyes off of Motoaki. “Go ahead. If you really want to do it, do it.”

Motoaki was surprised by Munechika’s blunt words. He held his breath and stared at Munechika.

“But if you slit your throat,” Munechika continued, “I’ll slit mine, too.”

“What?” Motoaki couldn’t believe his ears.

“I feel the same pain you do.” Munechika’s voice was quiet but forceful. He kept staring intently at Motoaki. “We have the same blood running through our veins. If you want to spill yours, I’ll spill mine, too. That’s the only thing I can do for you now.”

Motoaki's face screwed up as his emotions exploded. "Stop it. You're just saying that. You can say whatever you want, but I know you don't mean it."

Munechika's hand moved quickly to grab the knife away from Motoaki.

"Oof, let go!" Motoaki yelped.

Munechika pushed Motoaki back and pulled the knife towards himself. "Let me do it first. I'd spill all my blood for you." He pushed the blade to his neck, which dug into his skin. Bright red blood dribbled out.

Motoaki was shocked. He tore the knife away from Munechika's hands with all his might. "Stop it! What are you doing, Keigo?"

The knife fell to the floor. Motoaki jumped to pick it up, but one of his men was quicker and kicked it without a moment's delay. Tsuchii picked it up. Motoaki collapsed on the sofa as if he was relieved. He stared into space for a while, and then held his head in his hands and started sobbing. His cries echoed in the quiet room.

Munechika sat down next to him and embraced his brother who was weeping so much he was trembling.

"Motoaki, you can hate me if you want," Munechika murmured. "You don't have to forgive me. I know I did something terrible. But please stop dwelling on the past, for your own sake."

"Ever since Mom died, you've never seen me," Motoaki accused him childishly in between sobs. "You'd turn to me, but your eyes never saw me. You allowed me to be willful, but you never accepted me. You don't care about me at all, do you?"

"That's not true, Motoaki," Munechika denied. "I stole your mother from you. That was why I avoided you. I wanted to help you, but I was afraid to face you."

"Afraid?" Motoaki looked confusedly up at Munechika.

"Yeah. Every time I looked at you, I blamed myself. I remembered the past and it was so painful. I know it was all my fault, so I couldn't forget about it. But I wasn't lying when I said you're important to me. You're my only brother. You're the only family I have in this whole world." Munechika stroked Motoaki's wet cheek gently. "If you want me to, I'll stay here by your side and help you in any way I can."

"Really?" Motoaki asked.

Munechika nodded. "Yeah. But I won't spoil you like I did before. Are you prepared to face me seriously?"

Motoaki frowned and turned his face away. “What do you mean, prepared? You’re the one who ran away, Keigo. I’ve been waiting for you to come back.”

“Motoaki, promise me one thing.”

“What?”

“Cut off all ties with Godou,” Munechika said with a stern look on his face. Motoaki looked shocked. “If you’re going to take my hand, you need to let go of Godou’s.”

“But...” Motoaki seemed flustered. Godou’s presence was like a drug to him. He was probably instinctively afraid to lose someone he was that dependent on.

“You can’t?” Munechika prompted.

“T-that’s not it. But...”

Kaname, who was watching the whole situation from beside them, suddenly spoke up. “Motoaki-san, we found out who shot the president. It was a pro contracted by Godou. They had an agreement that would pay the man money every time he shot the president.”



Motoaki faced him with a look of absolute shock on his face. “What did you say?”

Kaname continued. “One of my men infiltrated Godou’s organization and reported that info back to us. Right now we’re trying to find the hitman.”

Motoaki clenched and opened his fist helplessly. He was afraid to lose Godou even though he knew Godou had betrayed him.

Munechika patiently waited for Motoaki to respond. Shiiba watched as well, praying for Motoaki to make the right decision.

“What will you do, Motoaki?” Munechika asked.

Motoaki moaned. “I...I...don’t know yet.”

“Motoaki,” Munechika said reproachfully.

Motoaki opened his bloodshot eyes wide. “S-shut up! It’s not that simple!” He suddenly stood up.

“If you choose Godou instead of me, then I can’t help you,” Munechika said mercilessly.

Motoaki felt like he was being driven more and more into a corner. He mulishly kicked the sofa. “I know! I know, just be quiet!” He chewed on his nails and glanced at Munechika. “It’s up to you, Keigo. I’ll decide depending on what you do next. If I can trust that you’ll never betray me again, I’ll cut Godou off completely.”

Shiiba figured that that was the best answer Motoaki could give. Munechika nodded silently and patted Motoaki on the shoulder.

“You can think about me later,” said Munechika. “Just carry out your responsibilities as the boss here. Clear your schedule for tomorrow night. We’re going to see Yashima.”

“Yashima?” Motoaki gasped. “The chairman of the Kantou Kyouwa Society?”

“Yes,” Munechika confirmed. “All the other bosses in the Association have agreed to exclude the Godou Syndicate from all deals. But if they think that the Matsukura Group is linked with the Godou Syndicate, they’ll become our enemies. Go see Yashima and tell him directly that you approve of the Association’s decision.”

“Okay,” Motoaki agreed.

“And give the president of the Koujin Association a call,” Munechika added. “He’s waiting for a move from you.”

“Okay,” said Motoaki. “I’ll call him.”

Motoaki didn't look at Munechika in the face as he spoke. But that night, a little bit of his selfishness seemed to disappear. Shiiba was sure Motoaki's rebellion against Munechika would gradually decline as well.

Munechika stood up from the sofa and looked at Shiiba. "You come with me. I have a lot of things to ask you."

His tone was casual, but Shiiba could tell he was very angry. And with good reason. Shiiba had broken his promise to Munechika. Munechika had told him not to leave him no matter what happened, but Shiiba had run off by himself.

That night Munechika and Motoaki had overcome their long years of strife. Shiiba knew he had to seriously confront his own feelings towards Munechika and settle things once and for all.

"President, please sit in the front," Kaname requested. "I'll put the seat down and you can lie down..."

"I'm fine," Munechika said, refusing Kaname's offer and sitting down next to Shiiba.

Kaname looked worried, but didn't say anything more and just shut the door. He drove the Mercedes out of the Matsukura compound and they disappeared into the city. Munechika crossed his arms and closed his eyes. His face looked pale. It hadn't even been a week since he had been shot. Shiiba knew there hadn't been any damage to his internal organs, but he also knew Munechika shouldn't be moving around like this. He wanted to ask Munechika if he was okay, but he hesitated because he knew it was all his fault.

"How did you know I was with Motoaki?" he finally asked.

Munechika was silent for a bit, but then he spoke while looking straight ahead. "Tsuchii contacted me and told me Motoaki had come home and brought a friend with him. I had a good feeling Motoaki had been with Godou, so I figured his 'friend' was you. I came straight from the hospital."

Suddenly Munechika grabbed Shiiba's hand. Shiiba silently cried out because Munechika was squeezing so hard it hurt.

"Tell me why you went to Godou. What have you been doing all this time?" Munechika's voice was hushed and low, but he was very angry.

"That's—" Shiiba began, but Munechika interrupted him.

"Don't hide things from me. Tell me everything about what happened

since you left the hospital until now. If you don't, I'll never forgive you." Munechika's anger pierced through the air between them.

Shiiba reluctantly told Munechika the whole story about what he had been up to from the moment he left the hospital. That he had bought a gun. That he had mailed his letter of resignation. That he had followed Godou and pointed the gun at him.

After he was done with his story, Munechika finally let go of his hand. It left a red mark on him.

"So in other words," said Munechika, "you went along with Godou to protect me?"

"Yes," Shiiba whispered. "But that wasn't just the reason. I wanted to find out if he was the one who killed my sister. I just couldn't turn back."

"You'll ruin yourself being that stubborn," Munechika muttered. "Don't you remember what I told you?"

Shiiba thought a little bit and then nodded. It was what Munechika had said the first night they slept together. He had gotten into trouble chasing after a Chinese gun broker when Munechika had saved him in the nick of time. He had warned him, "Protecting me or trying to find out the truth about your sister's murder isn't an excuse. You betrayed me."

"But I have a responsibility to protect you," Shiiba pointed out.

"If you sacrifice yourself to do that," Munechika snapped, "you'll be playing right into Godou's hands. Stop being so conceited!"

Shiiba couldn't say anything back. He knew he had done something reckless. He knew any excuse he gave would just fan the flames of Munechika's anger.

"Also, your resignation hasn't been accepted yet," Munechika added.

Shiiba couldn't believe his ears. "What?"

"Your boss, what was his name, Takasaki?" said Munechika. "Your resignation stopped at him."

"How do you know?" Shiiba whispered.

"After you disappeared, Shinozuka contacted me several times," Munechika revealed. "Shinozuka asked Takasaki not to pass your resignation on to the higher-ups until they could confirm directly with you that that was what you wanted."

Shiiba stared at Munechika's face, astonished. "So then, I'm still...?"

"Yep. You're still an active detective."

An active detective.

Shiiba had thought he had lost his job as a detective, so he didn't know how to take the news.

What should he do from now on? What was the best thing to do?

While he was thinking, the car arrived at Munechika's condo in Roppongi. Kaname came up to the room with them and made sure Munechika took various kinds of medicines.

"If you don't feel well, contact me at once," Kaname suggested.

"I will," Munechika answered. "Come again tomorrow morning."

Kaname called Shiiba to the door as he was about to leave, wanting to talk privately. "Shiiba-san, are you sure Godou didn't do anything to you?"

"He didn't, why?" Shiiba asked.

Kaname let out a sigh. "That's fine if he didn't. But the president's body isn't healed yet, so please don't tell him anything that will upset him."

Shiiba figured Kaname was worried that Shiiba might do something to excite Munechika.

"After you disappeared," Kaname revealed, "he tried to chase after you. I was barely able to stop him."

Shiiba couldn't reply. He bowed his head to Kaname silently.

"Well, I'm off now," Kaname said.

After Kaname left, Shiiba returned to the living room. Munechika was sitting on the sofa staring up at the ceiling.

"Come here," Munechika ordered in a low voice, and Shiiba obeyed. "Get on your knees."

Shiiba knew he couldn't disobey him, so he kneeled in front of Munechika like a loyal dog.

Munechika slapped Shiiba's cheek. A stinging pain raced through him, but he gritted his teeth as he looked up. He didn't feel angry. He also didn't feel the need to resist. He wanted Munechika to punch him as many times as he wanted if that made him feel better. Munechika had a right to. The only man Shiiba wanted to control him was right in front of him.

"You're awfully obedient today," Munechika said in a cold voice. "You look like you don't care how many times I hit you."

"You're right," Shiiba answered staring into Munechika eyes. "Hit me as much as you want."

They gazed at each other and an intense fire flickered in Munechika's eyes.

Shiiba couldn't blink, as if he were in a trance. Suddenly Munechika reached his arms out to him and pulled him to his chest. Shiiba thought his heart would stop at the shock of his sudden embrace.

Munechika's feelings exploded and he held onto Shiiba tightly. "Why did you leave me? I told you not to! Why do you always try to solve everything by yourself?" Shiiba thought his bones might break and he trembled. "You're not alone anymore..."

"Munechika..." A feeling like joy raced up Shiiba's spine.

It was so precious the way Munechika could confront his feelings. Even though Munechika was mad at him, Shiiba felt so happy.

"Munechika, I wasn't serious about breaking up. Godou made me say it, and—"

"I know," Munechika said immediately. "I'd never believe something like that."

Shiiba gave a sigh of relief. "Munechika, I'm so sorry. Please forgive me." He could barely speak. Love swelled in his chest, he thought he would go crazy. It became hard to breathe. "I didn't betray you. I never meant to betray you. I-I would never betray you. You're my S, and..."

"Shiiba, it doesn't matter about S and detective anymore," Munechika said sincerely. "No matter how we started out, we're past that point. Am I right? Or am I the only one who thinks that?"

Shiiba had believed that if he put his feelings into words, he would become too dependent on Munechika and he would become weaker. He realized that he was wrong. That was not how it was.

"Munechika, I...I..." He didn't know what to say. He shook his head, frustrated.

Munechika loosened his hold around Shiiba and said, "Swear to me. Not because I'm your S, but just as a man. Swear to me you'll never betray me. Swear to me that you'll always love me. I want to hear you say it. Stop making excuses."

"Munechika."

Shiiba felt a wave of emotions overcome him. So many different emotions came to him at once, he wasn't even sure what he was feeling anymore.

The walls he had worked so hard to build up around him were crashing down. He was so scared. He wanted to cry like a newborn baby. He had no idea it was so frightening to show someone else your soul. But he wanted to

say it. He wanted Munechika to know. He wanted to strip himself bare. He prayed that Munechika would accept him.

“I swear,” he said in a trembling voice. “I swear a million times. I love you, only you...”

He put into those words all the feelings he had hidden deep inside of him.

His position as a detective had protected Shiiba like an impenetrable armor, but it had also bound him. His true self had been shut away inside the hard armor. It had also hidden a gentle, wounded heart that was weak and fragile. He could take off his armor in front of Munechika. He could entrust his bare self to this man.

“I want you to let me love you,” he added. “And please...I want you to love me, too...” A tear dripped down from the corner of Shiiba’s eye.

Munechika tenderly wiped it away. “You don’t even have to ask. I already love you. I have for a while now.”

“Munechika...”

Shiiba pressed himself to Munechika’s chest. There was no turning back now. He couldn’t turn away from the feelings he felt for Munechika. He had thrown the promise he had made to Munechika as a detective to his S out the window. Now, he had made a new promise to him, as one man to another.

Because of their relationship as an S and detective, Shiiba had never allowed himself to acknowledge their relationship. But now that they had both admitted their strong love for each other, he couldn’t face Munechika like he had before.

His happiness won out over his uneasiness because he had finally allowed himself to surrender to Munechika. He was so happy he felt dizzy, wrapped up in Munechika’s strong embrace.

“You’re finally mine...” Munechika said with a dry smile.

That made Shiiba suddenly remember how desperate he had been to make Munechika his S.

Munechika. Be mine.

No. I’m not yours. You’re going to be mine.

They had been constantly trying to get a leverage over each other with their deals. They challenged and encouraged each other.

He had thought he would lose if he showed his true feelings, but he didn’t feel defeated now. As long as they shared their true feelings, it wasn’t a matter of winning or losing. Their hearts were now equal.

“That’s right.” Munechika held Shiiba’s head in his hands and dropped

gentle kisses on it. “You’re mine. All of you...is mine.”

Shiiba opened his mouth. Munechika answered him with his hot tongue.

It was their first kiss not as a detective and his S, but as two men who loved each other. They weren’t doing it for compensation. There was no reason for that anymore.

They longed for each other because they wanted each other. That was all.

Shiiba indulged in Munechika’s lips and before he knew it Munechika was unbuttoning his shirt. Shiiba reluctantly pushed Munechika away. “Munechika, your wound hasn’t healed yet...”

“Don’t worry about it.” Munechika paid no attention to Shiiba’s hesitation and stroked his back.

Shiiba turned his head away and pushed back Munechika. “Idiot. Of course I’m gonna worry.”

“My desire to make love to you is much more painful than my wound,” said Munechika. “You know that, don’t you?”

Shiiba sighed at Munechika’s usual arrogant smile.

“What will you do if your wound reopens?” he asked.

“If I pass out, call an ambulance,” Munechika said teasingly.

“Yeah, right!” Shiiba snapped.

Munechika grabbed his arm. “Wanna do it here? Or should we do it on the bed?”

Shiiba knew it was useless to refuse Munechika when he was this determined. He stood up.

“Let’s go to the bedroom.”

Chapter 7

Munechika sat down on the bed and stared at Shiiba, who stood in front of him.

“What?” Shiiba asked.

“Take off your clothes and turn around in front of me,” said Munechika.

“What?” Shiiba squawked.

“Just do what I said,” Munechika said stubbornly.

Shiiba didn’t know what kind of game this was, but he did as Munechika said and took off all of his clothes and then turned around again.

“Is it really that fun to make me strip for you?” he asked.

“Yes, it’s fun. That’s fine. Come here now.” Munechika stretched out both arms and Shiiba ran into them.

Munechika stroked Shiiba’s shoulders and arms, but his caress wasn’t sexual but exploratory.

“Do you think Godou did something to me?” Shiiba asked.

“Because you’re not honest,” Munechika said, continuing his examination of Shiiba’s body to make sure there were no cuts or bruises on it. “I won’t be able to be convinced until I can tell with my own eyes.”

“I told you, I’m fine,” Shiiba said. “Nothing happened, really.”

When Munechika had examined Shiiba’s whole body, he was finally convinced. He pushed Shiiba to the bed and took off his own shirt. Shiiba couldn’t take his eyes off the white bandage covering Munechika’s strong chest.

“How should we do it?” Shiiba asked seriously. “It should be a way that won’t bother your wound.”

Munechika grinned and kissed his nose. “I know you hate to lose, but just be still.”

“That’s how we always do—ah!”

A hot kiss interrupted Shiiba’s protests. Their tongues intertwined and he started breathing faster.

“Shiiba, don’t hold back,” Munechika whispered in between kisses. “Show me how much you want me. I want you, too. I want to savor every bit of you now that you’re mine.”

“Don’t provoke me,” Shiiba said. “I’ll get too excited and claw your wound.”

Munechika laughed lightly. “I don’t care. You can claw anywhere you want. Hang on to me as much as you want.” He nibbled at Shiiba.

Skin on skin. A pleasant heaviness. Complete happiness raced through Shiiba’s body.

Munechika licked his chest and a throbbing pleasure rose up from his core. Shiiba arched his back and clapped his hand over his mouth. If he didn’t, he knew he would scream out loud.

“You can’t hide your voice,” Munechika said teasingly. “I know everything you’re feeling right now.”

Shiiba couldn’t deny Munechika’s words. He felt everything. To a frightening degree. Just being next to Munechika made him more excited. His lust was overflowing.

Munechika grabbed Shiiba’s erection and Shiiba bit his own hand. Munechika pulled the hand away from Shiiba’s mouth.

“Why are you so shy today?” Munechika asked. “I guess that’s cute, once in a while...”

“S-shut up,” Shiiba said harshly. “Don’t talk, just focus on what we’re doing.”

Munechika lightly bit Shiiba’s earlobe. “I am. I’m focusing on you so much I feel like I’m going crazy.”

Shiiba knew it was just Munechika’s usual teasing, but for some reason he felt so shy he couldn’t stand it. He blushed and bit his lips.

Munechika stared at him. “Seriously, what’s wrong with you? You’re like a virgin or something.”

“D-don’t talk anymore.” Shiiba got up and forced Munechika into a different position. Even though he thought it was bad of him, he went ahead and unbuttoned Munechika’s pants himself.

“Now, you’re being aggressive,” Munechika teased.

“Sit still like an injured person should,” Shiiba muttered.

Munechika’s desire had begun to harden, and as soon as Shiiba touched it, it grew fully erect. Shiiba lowered his head and took it in his mouth. A sense of relief he couldn’t describe filled him.

When Munechika had been shot, he could have died. Shiiba might not have ever seen him again. And if that had happened, Shiiba would have had so

many regrets. He wouldn't have been able to forgive himself for not telling Munechika his true feelings and for running away from them. But now, as they touched each other, it was like he was touching a tangible proof of Munechika's life. He felt deep within his heart that Munechika was irreplaceable.

Shiiba teased and stroked Munechika's hotness. The love he felt in his chest overflowed. Sex and love perfectly overlapped, and even his lust felt sacred.

He wanted to keep sucking on Munechika, but Munechika stopped him and Shiiba reluctantly looked up.

"Lay down on your stomach," Munechika whispered. "It's my turn."

Shiiba obeyed. Munechika got off the bed and returned with some lotion. He rubbed Shiiba with his oily fingers, stroking between Shiiba's cheeks. Shiiba automatically lifted his hips, trembling just from being touched that way.

"Hurry, Munechika."

Munechika's fingers entered him. Hard fingers pressed against his soft insides. Shiiba cried out. A throbbing pleasure rose up in him and he became restless.

"Enough with your fingers," he moaned, "put it in..."

"Put it in? What in?" Munechika teased.

He was clearly enjoying Shiiba's impatience. He wanted to hear what Shiiba wanted.

If Munechika wanted to hear it so badly, Shiiba would tell him. As Shiiba took Munechika's fingers inside of him, he wriggled and looked behind him.

"I want your hard cock. I want your hot cock to thrust inside of me as deep as it can. I want you to thrust in and pull it out again and again, as rough as you can. You understand, right? I can't take it anymore. My whole body is begging for you. So put it in, please. I'm going to jump on you if you don't."

Munechika smiled happily at Shiiba's dirty talk. "You don't care about my injury at all, do you? If you were really worried, you wouldn't say something that would make me throw reason out of the window."

Munechika pressed his long hard cock against Shiiba's opening. Shiiba closed his eyes and pressed his cheek to the sheets while he waited for Munechika to enter him.

"Mmm...ahh..."

Munechika's heat slipped inside of him. He slammed it mercilessly in, as

deeply as he could. Shiiba felt a red hot heat spread inside of him. Every time Munechika roughly thrust into him, a writhing pleasure raced through his entire body.

“Munechika...that feels so good...yes, right there...” he murmured as Munechika moved inside him. He spread his legs more and lifted his hips higher.

Munechika’s hand reached out and gripped Shiiba’s wet cock; his fingers firmly grasped its base. “I won’t let you come yet. Not until I’m satisfied.”

“No...I wanna come now...” Shiiba protested, shaking his head.

“No. This is punishment for worrying me to death.”

Munechika licked the nape of Shiiba’s neck and lifted his chin.

Shiiba’s whole body was so sensitive he felt every touch to a frightening degree. He felt as if he would go mad at the way Munechika thrust in and out of him while dropping kisses and love bites all over his body.

“Munechika, I can’t take it anymore. I’m gonna go crazy.”

“I’m already crazy. Come fall to the place I’m at now.”

Shiiba begged over and over again, but Munechika groped Shiiba however he pleased. Shiiba was overcome with emotion and began to cry, but Munechika still wouldn’t stop. His body and heart melted in the sweet pleasure and pain. Munechika ground into him harder and pushed him to his limits. He began to think he might actually break.

But he wasn’t afraid. The only one who could break him or fix him was Munechika. He could give Munechika anything.

He was loved by Munechika and he loved Munechika just as much. As if they were searching for each other. As if they were finding each other’s souls.

He felt love for himself in a strange way as he felt how satisfied his heart was becoming.

Munechika longed for him so much it drove him crazy. He filled Shiiba up with his love until it overflowed.

It felt as if Shiiba was being reborn.

Like a chrysalis getting its wings. Like a damaged soul being born anew. He found a new version of himself within Munechika’s arms.

For the first time in Shiiba’s life, he felt like he had become someone of worth.



“You’re doing it like Godou,” Munechika murmured provokingly as they lay on top of the disheveled bed. He was propped up on one elbow, naked. “He takes his time with those he’s fond of. He’s the type who waits with anticipation as the seed he’s sown grows into a flower.”

Shiiba turned over beside Munechika. Maybe it was because of how hot his skin was still, but even the feel of the sheets rubbing on his body made him sigh.

“What’s with that sexy face? You want to go again?” Munechika rubbed Shiiba’s nipple teasingly with his fingertip.

Shiiba pushed the hand away. “Stop.”

“This time you get on top. I’m too tired, and my wound’s hurting.”

“Idiot, I told you not to overdo it,” Shiiba said, exasperated.

Munechika raised one eyebrow. “It’s your fault, you were talking so dirty!”

“Don’t blame me. Anyway, going back to what we were talking about before, are you trying to say Godou invited me to his villa so he could capture me?”

“If he used me as bait, you’d do anything he’d say. He probably thought it wouldn’t be long before you’d fall into his hands. So how was it? Did your feelings change while you were with him?”

Shiiba thought for a moment. He didn’t want to admit it, but, even though he hated Godou, he felt attracted to him. If he had stayed with Godou, those feelings might have gotten stronger.

“You said before that Godou was a frightening man,” he said. “But I finally realized that for myself. His heart is like a bottomless pit, and even if you only try to peek in, you don’t know how far you’ll fall down. To be honest, I was so scared I couldn’t face him straight on.”

“That was the right thing to do,” said Munechika. “He brings out the negative in everyone he’s with.”

“Was it the same with you? When you were with him, did you feel any sympathy for him?”

Munechika stroked Shiiba’s cheek and looked like he was deep in thought. “Yeah. We were both protected by yakuza and we both hated it. We were also deserted by a lot of people. We both ran away to the outside world. When we met, it was like I was looking at myself in the mirror. But he’s the kind of man who enjoys hate and anger. At first I trusted him as a friend and thought we

could have a life together, but he was swallowed up by the deep darkness within him that I lost sight of him.”

Shiiba wondered if their relationship had been more connected than he had imagined.

Godou had his own organization, and when he became a yakuza he appeared before Munechika again and vowed to get revenge on the man who had betrayed him. It was probably because of his warped attachment to Munechika that he won over Motoaki and tried to keep Shiiba for himself. “I wonder what Godou wants to do?” Shiiba wondered aloud.

The man had money. He had connections. He could have anything he wanted, but he had put his hands in a risky business like illegal firearms, and it was obvious he wasn’t making much of a profit off of them.

“I don’t know. Normal people can’t understand the thoughts of the insane,” Munechika said as if to try to stop the conversation. He pulled the blanket up over Shiiba’s bare shoulders. “Go to sleep. Let’s think about what we’ll do next tomorrow.”

What we’ll do next...

Shiiba sighed.

His relationship with Munechika had finally gotten to this point. He didn’t regret it, but there would be a lot more problems for them from now on.

Would he return to being a detective? Or would he have them accept his resignation?

Munechika put his arm under Shiiba’s neck. Shiiba said, “What?” and opened his eyes in surprise.

Munechika said in a conceited way, “Use my arm as a pillow.”

“What’s this all of a sudden?” Shiiba asked with a dry smile.

Munechika kissed his temple. “Because you look so uneasy.”

“Munechika...”

“I’m sorry about before. I blamed you because I was annoyed at myself. I put the anger I had for myself on to you.”

“Don’t apologize. You were right.”

“I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself if anything ever happened to you because of me,” Munechika said quietly.

Shiiba felt the same way. He had been caught up in protecting Munechika that he had neglected Munechika’s feelings. If he had been in Munechika’s shoes, he would have been even angrier.

“It was painful, wasn’t it?” Munechika murmured. “You don’t have to bear the pain by yourself.”

Shiiba nuzzled Munechika’s neck and put his hand on Munechika’s naked chest. Munechika’s heartbeat began to calm him and he slowly closed his eyes. Munechika stroked his head tenderly.

Shiiba was so happy to have returned to the warmth that lay beside him. He felt it from the bottom of his heart.

If he thought about what would happen next, he knew he would feel anxious and confused. But he wanted to feel satisfied just for that night. He didn’t want to think about anything. He just wanted to surrender himself to happiness.

The next morning, a very unexpected person showed up in Munechika’s house. Kaname showed the guest to the living room, and Shiiba saw his brother-in-law Hideyuki Shinozuka. Shinozuka had his trench coat draped over his arm as he approached Shiiba with a smile.

“Oniisan...”

Shinozuka’s eyes crinkled kindly. “Morning, Masaki. Everything the same?”

Shiiba was so happy to see Shinozuka. His chest felt warm seeing his brother-in-law’s usual smile.

“Yes,” he answered. “But why are you here?”

“I called him,” Munechika explained. Then he said to Shinozuka brusquely, “Sorry to have you come over so early in the morning,”

“Don’t worry about it,” Shinozuka replied. “The timing was perfect.”

Munechika sat down and motioned for Shinozuka to sit down as well. Still not completely understanding what was happening, Shiiba sat down next to Shinozuka.

What was going on? Shinozuka was a director of the Metropolitan Public Security Bureau’s Planning Division, a career track bureaucrat. Meanwhile, Munechika led a double life as a young businessman and a yakuza. What could these two opposites have to say to each other?

Kaname brought them some coffee.

Shinozuka took a sip and then turned towards Shiiba. “Masaki, you don’t have to worry about the investigation on you.”

“What?” Shiiba said, confused.

“Last night the manager of Human Resources was dismissed,” Shinozuka

explained casually. “He had been suspected of accepting bribes from a member of Parliament, and we finally got enough proof to confirm it. He admitted during questioning that there was no basis for the investigation on you.”

But the manager of Human Resources was supposed to uphold the morals for the whole force. For someone in such a position of high authority to get dismissed was extremely unusual. Usually someone like him would voluntarily resign or be forced to resign.

“It was the proper punishment for someone who abused his power and took bribes,” Shinozuka said coolly.

Apparently, Shinozuka had heard of the incident between the manager of Human Resources and the politician through his best friend Asakawa. That must mean that Shinozuka’s power had had some influence in the decision to dismiss the manager.

“So the investigation on you is over,” Shinozuka concluded. “But now you need to get in touch with Takasaki. He’s very worried about you.”

“I will. Thank you...for everything.” Shiiba bowed his head, and once again admired how powerful Shinozuka was and how skilled he was at gathering intelligence.

Shinozuka nodded and then turned to Munechika. “Now, what about you? What move are you going to make?”

“The Matsukura Group will be anti-Godou,” Munechika revealed. “The boss’ mind has been made up. The Kantou Kyouwa Society is also moving to exclude the Godou Syndicate from all of its dealings. The Kantou Kyouwa Society is a mediating organization, but, during emergencies, the directors can mobilize their troops. And I will be the one commanding the troops. We’re going to completely drive Godou into a corner.”

Shiiba opened his eyes wide. He stared at Munechika with a stern look on his face.

Asakawa was very knowledgeable about yakuza, and he had heard a rumor that Munechika was working with Kantou Kyouwa Society’s intelligence department. So Munechika really did have deep connections with the Society.

“Gaining control of military force, hmm? I don’t really support that, but...” Shinozuka trailed off as he gazed at Munechika sharply. They glared at each other for a bit, but then Shinozuka laughed lightly. “I suppose I’ll just have to look the other way this time. We’ll keep our eyes on Godou. I’m sure we’ll get something on him. We also found out that the politician involved with the

manager of Human Resources was taking illegal donations from a company Godou manages. If we pass along that information to the 2nd Investigation Unit at the station, I'm sure we can book him on bribery charges. We also have our eye on someone from a far-left group to see if we can question that person and make him a material witness against Godou."

Munechika and Shinozuka exchanged glances again. The pressure between them felt so strong, Shiiba had to say something.

"So we'll hit Godou from the front and behind," he said. "We're in agreement?"

"Seems like it," Shinozuka said, smiling. He got up from his chair. As he put on his coat, he murmured, "It looks like we're finally going to be able to choke the life out of him."

Shiiba hurriedly chased after Shinozuka as he was about to leave the living room. "Oniisan, wait! Let me walk you out."

He put on his shoes and they left the room together. Shinozuka called someone on his cell phone.

"It's me," he said. "I'm coming down now. Pull the car up." Apparently one of his men was waiting.

They walked side by side, and Shiiba said hesitantly, his voice trembling, "Oniisan, do you think Godou..." He paused.

Do you think Godou was the one who killed Yukari? Are you sure of it?

That was what he wanted to say, but he couldn't say it. Even if Shinozuka said yes or no, there would be too much meaning behind his answer, and Shiiba wasn't sure if he would be able to accept it now.

Shinozuka looked at Shiiba comfortingly. "I'm not the great person you think I am. I'm not strong or right or gentle."

"What do you mean? Oniisan, you're a wonderful person."

"I might seem that way in your eyes, but I'm weak and dirty," Shinozuka said with a gentle smile. "More than most people. If you knew the kind of person I really am, you might be disappointed."

Shiiba shook his head vehemently. "No, I wouldn't."

Then he whispered, "I'm not cut out to be a cop anymore." He had crossed a dangerous line. He had fallen in love with his S, gotten a gun illegally, and even fired it. He should be punished for what he had done. "I can't be a detective anymore. I need to put an end to it..."

Shinozuka patted him lightly on the shoulder. "Masaki, everyone makes

mistakes. But there's more than one way to take responsibility for those mistakes. The most important thing is that you don't forget about your actions and you keep on going. Everyone lives with compromises."

They got off the elevator and walked down the long hallway towards the entrance. Shinozuka added, "Inside my heart, I'm always apologizing to Yukari. I don't think that will ever change. But I'm not unhappy. I'm lucky to have had someone I can keep thinking of like this."

Even though his late wife lived on inside his heart, Shinozuka wasn't weighed down by the past. He was able to accept as a part of life the sadness, pain, and anger he felt.

They went to the front of the building and the doorman opened the door for Shinozuka and Shiiba. The car hadn't arrived yet.

A quiet rain was falling. It was cold enough for them to see their breaths.

Shinozuka stuffed both hands in his pockets and turned towards Shiiba again. "You and Yukari were like a pair to me. Not because you looked like each other. But because you were both equally important to me."

Shiiba was shocked at those words.

Godou hadn't plucked just one wing off of Shinozuka's butterfly. Shinozuka hadn't meant just Yukari or just Shiiba. Yukari and Shiiba together had made one whole butterfly.

And the one-winged butterfly was Shiiba, having lost Yukari.

"Oniisan..." Shiiba felt something warm blossom in his chest.



Shinozuka knew. He knew Godou was the one who had killed Yukari.

"It looks like we're finally going to be able to choke the life out of him."

He hadn't meant that as the police finally driving a dangerous individual they had their eyes on into a corner. It meant he would be able to punish the man he hated; the man who had killed his wife.

"Looks like the car's here." A white sedan pulled up and a young man came out of the driver's side carrying an umbrella. He must have been an investigator for Public Security.

The man bowed. "Director, I'm sorry I made you wait."

Shinozuka bowed his head slightly and smiled at Shiiba. "Masaki, don't do anything reckless," he warned Shiiba gently. "You're not alone, okay?" He stepped under the umbrella his man offered him, then got into the car.

Shiiba, standing there for a while, watched it pull away.

There was a deep darkness inside of Shinozuka, too. Behind that gentle smile, there was an impenetrable darkness. But he wasn't being swallowed by it. He embraced it and walked alone with it.

After seeing Shinozuka's strength, Shiiba made a decision.

He would put his mistakes and what had happened with his S, Munechika, behind him. It might be cowardly and unfair, but he couldn't quit being a detective.

He wanted to focus only on Godou right now. What was he going to do? Would he be able to solve the illegal firearms case?

He had to continue being a detective until it was settled.

And he would chase Godou, as a detective, until the end.

Chapter 8

He returned to the living room and saw Kaname disinfecting Munechika's wound. The gauze was stained with red blood. The wound had probably opened because of the sex they had the night before.

"I told you to rest," Kaname said in an agitated voice. "You're so impatient."

"I couldn't help it," Munechika whined. "A nice meal was set out in front of me. What man passes up a good meal?"

A nice meal. Shiiba snorted. He must mean me.

"Don't you know what the word 'restraint' means?" Kaname turned his sharp gaze on Shiiba, who jumped. "You, too, Shiiba-san, I told you not to excite him!"

"I-I'm sorry," Shiiba apologized seriously. "I'll be more careful."

Munechika burst out laughing. Whose fault do you think it is that I'm being lectured? Shiiba thought as he glared at him. Munechika feigned ignorance, turning away.

After Kaname finished wrapping his wound again, Munechika stood up and put his shirt on.

"What are you going to do now?" Munechika asked.

"Go talk to my boss," Shiiba answered. If he wanted to continue being a detective, he had to go see Takasaki and withdraw his resignation.

But, even though the investigation on him was settled, Shiiba had still acted selfishly so he had to be prepared for punishment.

"I'm going to work now," said Munechika. "I'll drop you off at the station."

Shiiba accepted his offer and left the building with Munechika. "Munechika, what's your connection to the Kantou Kyouwa Society?" he asked as they got into the Mercedes with Kaname driving. "How do you know what they're doing?"

"I'm indebted to the director of the Society," Munechika said, crossing his arms. "I do various things for them, and now I'm sort of an express man to them."

"What kind of person is the director?" Shiiba continued to ask.

"He's a big-shot yakuza named Kounosuke Yashima," Munechika revealed.

“He was the head boss of Shouwa. He’s retired now, but he still has a very strong influence in the yakuza world. He used to be my guardian.”

Shiiba was surprised. That must be the man who took care of Munechika after his mother had died.

“Is he your uncle on your mother’s side?” Shiiba asked.

“Yeah. He’s like a grandfather to me, though.”

Now Shiiba understood why the Kantou Kyouwa Society had cooperated with Munechika even though he was involved with the Matsukura Group. The director knew he could trust Munechika.

Shiiba got out of the car in Shibuya. Munechika told him to contact him as soon as he could.

“Don’t move on your own ever again,” Munechika said forcefully. “No matter what happens, report everything to me. Got it?”

Shiiba watched as the Mercedes sped off down the road and remembered what Shinozuka had said before.

“You’re not alone.”

His brother-in-law was right.

Shiiba had thought he was by himself this whole time. He thought no one was on his side.

But that wasn’t true. He had two strong men supporting him on either side.

He had been lonely and had lived by himself, so he had thought that strength was all about not depending on others. But that point of view had just been a sad sense of self-satisfaction.

People grew stronger when they were encouraged by others. There was a certain courage of strength you couldn’t attain on your own.

Shiiba called Takasaki from a phone booth. “It’s Shiiba. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I made you worry so much. Can I come see you right now? I’ll be waiting in Shibuya. Okay. Goodbye.”

When Shiiba met Takasaki at his condo in Shibuya, Takasaki tore up Shiiba’s letter of resignation right before his eyes. And he strongly reprimanded him for cutting off contact for a whole week without permission and for acting selfishly.

Shiiba received one week of house arrest and ten percent salary cut for three months.

Even though he had been a disgrace to the department and he had to endure punishment, he was thankful he hadn't gotten a longer period of time for house arrest.

Shiiba reported that there was a strong possibility that Takanari Godou was involved in illegal guns. Takasaki told him that they didn't have solid proof yet, but they had received tips that the president of Asahi Construction company, Yasuo Maruoka, who had been killed in a hit and run accident, had conspired to sell the firearms. Takasaki promised to give more information when it became available.

Shiiba didn't mention Kiri Yoshizawa. Godou had gotten her involved in this, and Shiiba wanted to approach her and get her to turn herself in. She was still a minor. She could still start over if she wanted to.

While Shiiba was under house arrest, he ordered a new cell phone. He said he had lost his previous number, so now it was impossible to place a call to his old one.

Munechika came to Shiiba's condo every day and relayed the daily information about Godou. Munechika told him something very strange four days into Shiiba's house arrest.

"Godou disappeared?" Shiiba gasped.

"Yeah," Munechika affirmed. "We've been trying to locate him, but we don't know where he is."

"What about his villa in Hayama?" Shiiba asked.

"Completely empty. He hasn't been to his condo in Ebisu either. Motoaki told us about some of his regular places and we've had them staked out 24/7, but he hasn't shown up in any of them."

"Maybe he found out that you and the police were after him and he escaped the country."

"I don't know. He just disappeared all of a sudden." Munechika threw himself on Shiiba's bed and looked up at the ceiling. "We caught a bunch of members of his syndicate, but all of them say they don't know where he is. He hasn't shown up at any of his companies, either."

Shiiba was concerned about how exhausted Munechika looked as he sat down beside him. "What's going on with the Godou Syndicate? How are they managing without their boss?"

"It's like a crazy mob. Ever since Godou disappeared they've been wavering. I'm sure it's only a matter of time before they split up. They're all

after money so they sucked up to Godou. But now that he's gone, they won't stick by him forever."

The Kantou yakuza organizations had already received a notification from the Kantou Kyouwa Society about excluding the Godou Syndicate from any dealings. Most of his umbrella companies immediately cut ties with Godou so as not to suffer the same fate.

Shinozuka had told Shiiba that the 2nd Investigation Unit was pursuing Godou to arrest him. So how had Godou disappeared when both the yakuza and the police were working as a united front against him?

"I'll try going to Kiri's place tomorrow," Shiiba announced.

Kiri might know where Godou was. Plus he was worried about her.

"Kiri Yoshizawa?" Munechika asked. "But you're still under house arrest. Just wait."

"I'll just go to check it out a little," Shiiba said stubbornly.

"You can never sit still can you?" Munechika raised his hand and stroked Shiiba's cheek.

Shiiba squeezed his hand. His eyes widened with surprise.

"Do you have a fever?" he asked. "You're warm."

Munechika raised his eyebrow casually. "Just a little."

"Munechika, you're still not well. Don't push yourself. Don't be so impatient, I'm sure Godou will turn up somewhere."

Munechika was usually the one telling Shiiba not to do anything reckless, but this time it was the other way around. But Shiiba could tell that Munechika was getting desperate.

"I know," said Munechika.

"Hurry home and rest," Shiiba ordered.

Munechika narrowed his eyes unsatisfactorily. "You want me out of here that badly?"

Shiiba scowled. "What are you talking about? I'm just worried about you—"

Munechika suddenly grabbed his arm and pulled him down.

"W-what are you...?" Shiiba stammered.

"If you're worried about me, kiss me," Munechika ordered arrogantly.

Shiiba was confused. "Why?"



“Because I’ll get better,” Munechika said seriously. “Your kisses are much more effective than any vitamins or medicines I take.”

Shiiba was amazed. “Where the hell did you get that cheesy line?”

“Come on,” Munechika coaxed. “I’ve been running out of you. I need to recharge.”

“We see each other every day,” Shiiba pointed out.

“We see each other, but we haven’t had sex. I bet that’s why I have a fever, because I’m so pent up.”

“What kind of logic is that?” Shiiba complained, but the love he had for Munechika grew inside of him as he listened to Munechika’s childish demands.

He lowered his face and pressed his lips softly to Munechika’s. Munechika slipped his hot tongue inside Shiiba’s mouth.

“Mmmm...” Shiiba moaned from the raw feeling of their tongues intertwined.

As they exchanged deep kisses, he felt Munechika’s hand slipping under his shirt. Shiiba suddenly grabbed the hand and sat up.

“We can’t,” he said firmly. “We can only kiss.”

“Stop being so stingy!” Munechika cried out. “You sound like a girl!”

Shiiba shook his head and pushed Munechika’s hand away. “You have a fever. We can’t. If you collapse, Kaname will yell at me again.”

“So let him,” Munechika said teasingly. “He just hates lovey-dovey stuff.”

“No,” said Shiiba. “I’m not fearless like you.”

Munechika sulked like a child, falling silent. Shiiba smiled dryly and grabbed his hand to soothe him. Munechika squeezed his hand back.

Their feelings got across to each other just from that slight warmth.

But happiness wasn’t the only thing Shiiba felt. Now that their relationship had changed, he couldn’t help but feel a little uneasy.

Munechika had told Motoaki that he would stay by his side and support him.

And now that Munechika was officially managing the Matsukura Group, he would continue to be directly involved with Motoaki. He wouldn’t be on the sidelines like he had been before. He would be helping Motoaki from the inside.

If Munechika was just an ordinary S, Shiiba wouldn’t care. He would be able to get information easier if Munechika had a higher position within the

Group.

But now that they had a personal relationship, things were different.

Shiiba realized they couldn't continue their business relationship as a detective and an S. He didn't want to put the man he loved in danger. And he didn't want to feel that he was just using Munechika to get information for his job as a detective. Even if Munechika wanted to retain their professional relationship, Shiiba wouldn't be able to give him orders anymore.

But if he erased the record of Munechika being an S, he would lose his cover for continuing their relationship.

Detective and yakuza. No matter how much he thought about it, it seemed impossible. And if Munechika's ties to the yakuza world were going to get deeper, Shiiba would have to quit being a detective in order for their relationship to continue.

Would he choose Munechika or his job? He only had two choices.

"Shiiba, what are you thinking about?" Munechika asked quietly.

"Nothing, really," Shiiba replied.

Munechika saw right through his lie. "You're uneasy, aren't you? Just put everything on hold for now. We can think about it after the thing with Godou is over. I've been thinking a lot, too. So you don't have to give me an answer just yet."

Munechika probably wanted to say not to worry about it.

Shiiba nodded and Munechika kissed his hand.

"Munechika, can I ask you something?" he said.

Munechika sat up on one elbow. "What?"

"How long have you had feelings for me...in...that way?"

"What?" Munechika raised his eyebrows at Shiiba's vague question.

"H-how long? You know what I mean, right?" Shiiba was so embarrassed asking the questions, he sounded angry.

"Are you asking me how long I've wanted you?" Munechika asked.

"Y-yeah," Shiiba answered.

"Why are you so embarrassed? I can't believe you're the guy who got naked and masturbated in front of a complete stranger so long ago." Munechika grinned and Shiiba hit him with a pillow.

"It's really not necessary to bring up things I'm trying to forget," Shiiba said with a huff.

"You were the one who wanted to hear it," Munechika said laughing. "If I

had told you while you were masturbating that I wanted you, I think you would have killed me.”

Shiiba was shocked. “Are you serious?”

“Idiot, I’m joking.”

Shiiba turned away from Munechika. “Never mind! I never should have asked you.”

“Don’t get mad! That’s one of my favorite memories. I got so turned on by how frustrated you got since you hate to lose. I got chills when you looked at me with that challenging look in your eyes and asked me if I wanted you to lick my Beretta.”

“And then you said you weren’t a Beretta, but a Magnum.”

Shiiba remembered those words. He wondered what Munechika would think after finding out how he had almost killed himself. He wanted to tell him but decided he should keep that incident himself.

“Yeah, because it’s true,” Munechika declared with satisfaction.

Shiiba glanced at him coldly. “Aren’t you going to answer my question?”

“Yeah. But to be honest, I’m not really sure myself. I was interested in you from the moment I first saw you, though.”

“The first time? When you dropped by Andou’s place?”

Andou had been Shiiba’s previous S. He had been a member of the Matsukura Group and had been an excellent S. He had been killed the year before by the Taiwanese mafia. Because of that incident Shiiba came to know Munechika, who had been Andou’s friend.

“No, I knew about you before that. One summer day I saw you and Andou at Bernard’s in Shinjuku. I was interested in you so I did some digging around and found out you were a detective. I’ve been interested in you since then. I guess it was love at first sight.” Munechika laughed lightly and intertwined his fingers with Shiiba’s. “Every time I saw you I was more and more attracted to you. At first it was just out of curiosity, but the desire to make that nosy detective mine became so strong. The more I found out about your complicated nature, the more I fell for you. Before I realized it, there was no turning back.”

Once he heard Munechika’s story, Shiiba realized that it didn’t matter when he had started having feelings for him.

A reason would have eased his worries, but he didn’t care if Munechika didn’t have one.

They met and were attracted to each other, they had struggled together, and now they had come to this point.

Just that was everything to them.

“Aren’t you going to ask me when I started liking you?” Shiiba asked teasingly.

But Munechika just smirked arrogantly, saying, “I don’t need to ask. It was love at first sight.”

“Oh, please. Every time I saw you, you always totally pissed me off.”

“Oh, you loved to hate me. You were pissed at yourself for being attracted to me.”

Shiiba couldn’t deny it. He looked down at Munechika. “Are you serious?”

“I’m serious. You were meant to be mine.”

“Okay, I give up.” Shiiba laughed, bent down and kissed Munechika on his forehead.

The next day, Shiiba dropped by Yoshizawa Iron Works.

It was a weekday, but no one was working in the shop. Shiiba passed through the quiet shop and headed towards Tokujuuro Yoshizawa’s house.

He rang the doorbell, but no one answered. He circled around the yard, thinking no one was home, but then he saw Yoshizawa sitting on the porch, staring out at the yard with a dazed look on his face.

His expression looked so vacant that it took a while for Shiiba to call out to him.

“Yoshizawa-san,” Shiiba called gently so as not to surprise the old man.

Yoshizawa slowly turned his head and looked up at Shiiba. “Oh, Shibano-san. Welcome.” He gave his usual gentle smile which relieved Shiiba.

Shiiba bent down his head slightly and approached Yoshizawa. “How are you feeling?”

“The same,” the old man replied softly.

There was a dog collar in Yoshizawa’s hand. Shiiba looked around the small yard. He had seen Kiri petting an old white dog, but he didn’t see it anywhere now.

“Where’s the dog?” he asked.

“Died three days ago,” Yoshizawa revealed. “He was old, though...”

Shiiba felt sad looking at Yoshizawa’s wrinkled, lonely face.

“He was a quiet dog and he passed away the same way,” Yoshizawa continued. “When I woke up in the morning I saw him lying in the doghouse, dead. He looked like he was just sleeping.”

“Is that right?” Shiiba said casually. “I’m sure Kiri-san is taking it hard, too.”

Yoshizawa frowned. “She doesn’t know, yet. She left about two weeks ago and she hasn’t come home, yet.”

That must mean Kiri had been with Godou this whole time.

“Did something happen?” Shiiba inquired. “Did you two have a fight?”

“No. She’s involved with a bad man. She’s being controlled by him and he’s using her. I’m so worried about her, I don’t feel like I can die peacefully.” Yoshizawa suddenly began to tremble. Tears dripped down to the dog collar he clutched in his hand. It was like those tears were the only moisture left in his exhausted body.

Shiiba couldn’t stay silent anymore. At this rate Kiri would be Godou’s accomplice and the police would be after her. He decided to ask Yoshizawa the truth if that would help Kiri get off a little easier.

He sat down in front of Yoshizawa. “Yoshizawa-san, Kiri-san’s being used by Godou to make guns, isn’t she?”

Yoshizawa’s eyes widened as he looked at Shiiba. He was so surprised his lips began to tremble. “How did you...”

Shiiba bowed his head in apology. “I’m sorry I kept it from you, but I’m a detective. I’ve been investigating you in connection with illegal firearms.”

Yoshizawa was surprised, but he seemed to understand. He looked up at Shiiba with his tear-stained face and nodded slightly. “Is that right...deep down I had always wondered if that was the case. I don’t blame you for hiding it from me.”

Shiiba was sure those words were genuine. Yoshizawa had been in jail twice for making illegal firearms. He grasped the old man’s hand and said, “Please tell me. How did Kiri start making the guns? I know you were involved in illegal firearms before. You called them Yoshitoku Guns and they had a very high reputation. Did you teach Kiri how to make them?”

Yoshizawa’s shoulders dropped shamefully. “It’s all my fault. I’m the one at fault here. Shibano-san, I was secretly making illegal guns even after I got out of prison. But not to sell to people. Just for my own enjoyment. I think I was obsessed with making guns. I didn’t tell anyone about it. But one day Kiri

found a gun I had made. She was sixteen. She showed a strange interest in them. She took them apart and put them back together, and then took them apart and put them back together again. After she understood the construction, it seemed like she wanted to make them herself. It sounds strange, but maybe the obsession for guns is in our blood.” Yoshizawa smiled weakly and gave a small sigh. “I knew I had to stop her, but once I saw what beautiful workmanship her guns were, I couldn’t say anything. To me, guns aren’t fearful weapons, they’re pieces of art. I got so much joy out of making such beautiful and delicate designs. That was really my only goal. But then a man I knew from work asked if I would start making guns again. It was someone I knew from the past.”

“Maruoka, the president of Asahi Construction?”

“Yes. I turned him down, but he was very persistent. And one day, he brought Godou here.” Yoshizawa clutched the collar in his hand. His hand was trembling slightly. “From the moment he saw her, I could tell Godou was interested in Kiri. She’s usually so shy and she never opens up to strangers, but she became immediately attracted to him as well. Soon he started coming here to see her more and more often. I’m not sure how, but he found out that she made guns, too. I fell ill and couldn’t work anymore, and at some point Kiri began to make guns at Godou’s request.” Yoshizawa became agitated, breathing hard. He took deep breaths to calm himself. “Maruoka sold the finished guns. I tried to stop Kiri many times. I told her it was fine if she continued making them as a hobby because it wouldn’t cause trouble for anyone. But once you give them to someone else, people might use them to kill someone. I didn’t want to burden her with the sin of murder. So I...I told her to stop so many times, but she...but she...” Suddenly Yoshizawa made an anguished face and grasped his chest.

“Yoshizawa-san, calm down,” Shiiba said and rubbed his back gently. But Yoshizawa’s face wrenched painfully even more as he struggled to breathe. “Take deep breaths.”

“She’s completely under his control...and she wouldn’t listen to me anymore...” Yoshizawa’s face went pale and he collapsed, perhaps because of an angina attack.

“Yoshizawa-san, are you all right?” Shiiba quickly supported his body and laid Yoshizawa on the porch. “Medicine, where’s your medicine?”

“S-Shibano-san, please help Kiri...Please save...her...” Yoshizawa pleaded

in a weak voice.

Shiiba raced inside the house and looked around. The medicine was on the tea table. He returned quickly with the medicine and some water, but Yoshizawa had already lost consciousness. Shiiba wasn't sure if he should force the old man to take the medicine or not. Being so elderly he might choke on the medicine.

If it was just an angina attack, he would be fine in a while. But since he had fainted, it was possible he had had a heart attack. And if that was the case, there was no time to lose.

Shiiba quickly called an ambulance. He waited a few minutes talking to the unconscious Yoshizawa. The ambulance arrived more quickly than he thought it would.

A middle-aged woman in her fifties rushed over to Yoshizawa as he was being carried away on a stretcher. She kept calling out to Yoshizawa in a desperate voice. "Toku-san? Hey, Toku-san! What's wrong? Toku-san, wake up!"

"Are you a family member?" one of the paramedics asked Shiiba, but he shook his head.

"No, I'm a friend of his granddaughter's," Shiiba replied.

"I see."

The paramedic turned to the middle aged woman next, and after she had answered a few questions, they got in the ambulance together.

After Shiiba was alone he took off his shoes and went inside the house.

The house looked as if time had frozen it in the Showa era. Shiiba's eyes stopped on a Japanese-style chest. An old picture frame was on it, containing a picture of a young couple and their small child. It was probably Kiri at about age five. She was smiling and the man who appeared to be her father was hugging her. Her mother cuddled them both and looked happy. Perhaps Yoshizawa had taken the picture.

Shiiba placed the picture frame back on top of the chest and went to the back of the room. He opened the sliding door and saw another room with a bed, desk, bookcase, and a chest. He figured it was Kiri's room, but it was awfully plain for a teenager's bedroom.

There were many books about lathes on the bookshelf. There wasn't a single comic book or novel. Middle school textbooks were lined up on the top shelf, which looked like they had never been used.

Yoshizawa had told him that ever since Kiri had stopped speaking ten

years ago, she hadn't gone to school much. She probably hadn't gone to middle school, either.

Shiiba sat down on Kiri's bed and tried to imagine what was going through her mind.

She had been a small girl when she had witnessed her parents' suicide. She had been in so much shock that she had become mute. She didn't have any friends and lived with just her elderly grandfather. What did she think about when she lived that kind of life? She was driven just by her job working the lathe and didn't have any other enjoyment.

There was darkness inside of Kiri which Godou had taken advantage of. He had pulled out the anger and sadness that had slept deep within her, and used it for his own goals.

Everyone had darkness deep in their hearts. It was a lonely place where no light could reach. Like the bottom of a deep ocean.

In the darkness, people could sympathize with each other. Search for each other. Mix with each other and fuse with each other. But then their union would produce an even deeper darkness.

Shiiba prayed that Kiri wouldn't be completely swallowed up by Godou's darkness and that he could help her somehow.

Not because he was a detective, but because he had fought the darkness inside of himself as well.

Hatred and resentment. Suspicion and distrust.

He had fought those negative feelings for so long so they wouldn't swallow him up. Even though he knew his negative feelings had the power to pierce through him, he fought against them, knowing that those negative emotions did not encompass his whole being. That he was more than just the darkness that lived within him.

He hadn't overcome the darkness, yet. He was still in the middle of the fight. But he prayed that he wouldn't lose.

So he wanted Kiri to come back to a place where light could shine on her again.

How could he persuade her?

He searched some more in her room until he found a bag inside a box on top of her desk. A cell phone company logo was on the bag. He quickly ripped open the nylon bag to see what was inside. When he checked inside, there were cell phone accessories and an instruction manual, just as he had thought.

There was also a copy of the contract, which was dated a month before

and bearing Godou's name. So, Godou had bought a cell phone for Kiri.

Shiiba took out his own cell phone and prayed while he dialed the number listed on the contract.

The call went through. The phone rang for a while before someone picked the call up. But the person on the other line didn't say anything.

"Is this Kiri? It's me, Shiiba." There was still no response, so Shiiba continued. "If it's you, Kiri, tap on the phone so I know it's you."

There came a tap tap sound like she was tapping with her fingernails. There was no way to know if it was actually her, but Shiiba decided to push on.

"Are you with Godou right now? Tap twice for yes and once for no."

Tap tap.

"Where are you? Tokyo?"

Tap tap.

"I'm at your house right now, Kiri. Your grandpa collapsed and he got taken away by an ambulance. It doesn't look good. When I got here, your grandpa was sitting on the porch and he looked really sad. He told me that white dog had died." Shiiba took a breath. "Kiri, come back. Get away from Godou. Your grandpa's so worried about you. Go to the hospital with me."

There was no response this time. Maybe she was torn or maybe she had no intention of coming home.

No, Shiiba thought firmly. Kiri cared for Yoshizawa. She had to be worried about him.

"If you can't get out now, come at night when Godou leaves. I'll be waiting here for you. I'll wait here, okay? So come home. Got it?"

There was still no response. The phone line went dead.

Chapter 9

“Okay. I got it. I’ll call you back.” Shiiba hung up the phone after speaking to Munechika.

The lady neighbor who had gotten in the ambulance had come back a little while ago and told Shiiba the name of the hospital they had taken Yoshizawa to. The old man did have a heart attack and they weren’t sure if he was going to make it.

Shiiba informed the woman that he told Kiri he would wait for her there. She was a kind woman. She went back to her own house for a while, and reappeared a little while later saying, “Aren’t you hungry?” and handed him some tea and onigiri.

According to the woman, Yoshizawa didn’t have any relatives so if anything happened to him she didn’t think that there would be anyone to look after Kiri.

Shiiba sat down on the porch as Yoshizawa had done to wait for Kiri to come home.

As he sat still, many thoughts came to mind. Everything that had happened up to that point. What would happen from now on. Thoughts came and went like the ebb and flow of rushing waves. He was never good at waiting for things. He hated sitting still, so waiting there was torture for him.

After realizing how painful waiting was, he suddenly felt like apologizing to Munechika. He had left while Munechika was unable to move resulting to Munechika being worried sick and irritated at himself because he couldn’t do anything. The sense of helplessness Munechika must have felt at being able to do nothing but wait for Shiiba to return, if Shiiba had been Munechika, he wouldn’t have been able to handle that.

But he had to wait. He had decided to trust Kiri, so he had to wait.

He picked up the collar that had fallen to the ground and silently talked to Kiri.

Kiri, the person you care for the most is suffering right now. The person who loves you most in the entire world. Let’s go see him together. He’s worried about you. He’s praying for your happiness. So please, Kiri, come home.

Shiiba continued to wait for Kiri. But no matter how long he waited, she didn’t show up. He decided to call her again and just as he pulled out his cell

phone, it rang in his hands. For a second, he thought it might be Kiri, but it was actually Munechika.

“Kiri isn’t home yet?” Munechika asked immediately.

“Nope,” Shiiba replied.

“Give up on it tonight and just go home. You’re still under house arrest, remember?”

“Just a little while longer. I’ll just stay here a little bit longer.”

Shiiba heard Munechika sigh on the other end.

“I’ll go there right now,” Munechika declared.

“Why?”

“I just want to see you.”

It sounded like Munechika wanted to say something else, but he hung up immediately. Shiiba smiled dryly and returned his cell phone to his pocket. Munechika was clearly worried about him. He sighed, feeling guilty again about what he had done to Munechika.

Suddenly he saw a car’s headlights. He looked over and saw that a taxi had pulled up in front of the ironworks.

As soon as he saw someone get out, he raced towards the entryway. He put on his shoes and threw the door open. Kiri stood before him.

“Kiri!”

She stared at him with her black eyes. She was wearing jeans and a black sweater with an army jacket over it.

“Welcome home,” said Shiiba.

She nodded and started to walk slowly. Shiiba followed her. She headed towards the yard and stopped in front of the doghouse. She crouched down and peeked inside and, as soon as she saw that there really was no dog inside, she stood up and clenched her fists.

“Your grandpa said the dog was already dead when he woke up,” Shiiba said quietly. “Probably because of old age.”

Kiri looked at Shiiba with sad eyes.

“Your grandpa had a heart attack. It doesn’t look good. Do you want to go to the hospital now?”

Kiri looked as if she was thinking about it. She then turned her gaze to the ironworks. She grabbed Shiiba’s hand and wrote, “I want to show you something.”

“What’s that?” he asked suspiciously.

Kiri cocked her head and just went inside the house. She came out holding

a key ring. She then headed towards the ironworks. Shiiba wasn't sure what she was up to, but he followed after her.

She opened the door to the ironworks and flicked on the light switch. Half of the lights turned on. She then made her way between the lathes and grinders and stood in front of a small room that was walled off. She turned around and beckoned Shiiba to come closer. He obeyed without any comments. She used one of the keys to unlock the door.

Inside was a large work table with various things on it. They were probably parts for prototypes.

Kiri slid a key into the lock of a steel locker and opened the doors. Shiiba peered inside and caught his breath.

There were dozens of glinting revolvers stuffed inside a cardboard box.

Kiri picked one up and then grabbed another small box, which contained bullets. She loaded the gun with skillful hands, and put five bullets in, fully loading it.

“Did you make all those guns?” Shiiba asked, still shocked.

Kiri nodded and held the gun out to him. He took it and spun the cylinder. It moved smoothly. It was a single-action revolver, and surprisingly it had what was called a ventilated rib, which kept the gun cool after firing. It was probably a copy of the Colt Python. But as he inspected the gun more closely, it looked like she had combined the best parts of a Colt Python and a Smith & Wesson M29.

He couldn't know how accurate it was unless he fired it or took it apart, but just by looking at it he could see what wonderful workmanship it was.

“Kiri, were all these guns supposed to go to Godou?” he asked.

Kiri took a notepad off of a desk and started writing. She showed it to Shiiba. “Yes. But he doesn't need all of them anymore. You can have these.”

“Okay, I'll take care of—” Shiiba stopped. He had heard a strange sound. It was a splashing sound, like some kind of liquid that was being poured.

Kiri must have noticed it too, because she turned towards the door. Shiiba, still holding the gun in his hands, ran to the middle of the ironworks.

There was a man in a suit standing in the back of the dimly lit room. He was holding a plastic container while walking around and scattering a clear liquid all over the place. He was walking around casually, as if he was just watering plants.

“Godou, what are you doing?” Shiiba asked loudly.

Godou set down the plastic container by his feet and smiled gently at

them. “Shiiba, I didn’t expect to see you here. I was worried about you since Motoaki took you and you didn’t return! I can’t get a hold of him. Bad boys.”

“What did you just pour?” Shiiba asked. “Gasoline?”

The room reeked of gasoline. Shiiba’s mind raced. They were close to the exit. If Godou made any weird moves, he could grab Kiri and make a run for it.

“I’ve had a bit of bad luck, so I decided to burn everything. Kiri wants that, too, right?” Godou looked at Kiri, who was standing behind Shiiba. “Kiri, let’s burn this place down. Let’s act like those guns never even existed. I know you love working with the lathe, but I also know how bad you want to escape this place. It’s been too much of a burden to stay in this place after your parents died. If only this place had never existed, they wouldn’t have had to kill themselves. You can be free now.” He reached a hand out to Kiri. “You don’t have to make guns anymore, and I won’t ask you to. You’re more important to me than that. So come back to me. Let’s go off to a faraway country, just the two of us. You won’t leave me all alone, right?” He crept closer to them with his hand still outstretched, trying to draw Kiri in.

Suddenly Shiiba grabbed Kiri’s arm, saying, “You can’t, Kiri. Let’s go see your grandpa now. You can’t go back to Godou.”

Kiri’s eyes wavered. She didn’t know what to do.

“Kiri, you’re my one-winged butterfly,” Godou called out with a sad expression on his face. “Come here. Come on.” Kiri stared at Godou and then suddenly shook off Shiiba’s hand.

“Kiri!” Shiiba tried to grab her, but he missed.

Godou held her in his arms and nuzzled her hair with a satisfied and triumphant look on his face.

“I’m so happy, Kiri,” he whispered while staring at Shiiba. “You’re such a good girl. You’re the only one who loves me.”

Shiiba glared at Godou. “You’re the one behind the illegal guns, aren’t you? Did you kill Maruoka? Why?”

“He was too greedy. When I put him in charge of gun sales, he handed out prototypes and flops to his men. Since they were in the hands of a bunch of amateurs, people found out about the illegal weapons. He got what he deserved.” Godou pulled a gun from his pocket. He held it over his head so Shiiba could see it, and then he pressed it to his lips. Shiiba could see the delicate pattern on the barrel. It had a butterfly engraved on it.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Godou crooned. “Kiri made this, too. Don’t you think it’s wonderful that such a brutal weapon can be beautiful, too?”

Shiiba concentrated on the gun in his own hand.

They both had guns. This wouldn't end without someone getting hurt.

"When people hold a gun, there's an illusion that they're stronger," Godou continued. "If you point a gun at someone, you can make them do anything. It's almost like a magic item that reveals people's evils and desires. This gun was my design and Kiri made it, but it'll be sold everywhere. It'll become easy to get, and this boring world will get a little more interesting." He stared at the gun with love in his eyes, and then he said quietly, "I killed your sister."

Shiiba was stunned at this sudden confession. He never expected to hear the truth from Godou during such an explosive situation.

"Eight years ago I came home from Hong Kong to have my gun engraved," Godou went on. "After it was finished, I thought the workmanship was so beautiful. I was so moved I wanted to shoot someone with it."

"What?" Shiiba whispered involuntarily, not understanding Godou's words.

Godou paid no attention to him and just continued his tale. "Where should I shoot it? Who should I shoot? I thought for a while. And then I came up with a good plan. I'd aim for someone from the Koujin Association, who at the time was fighting with the Togetsu Syndicate."

"You did it for the boss?" Shiiba whispered.

Godou smiled darkly. "No, not for him. I simply wanted to shoot someone and the gang fight was a convenient place for me to do it. I parked my car in a place where I could see the Koujin Association's office and waited. I was going to shoot the first person I saw coming out of the building. A young man soon came out. I put my hand on the trigger. But just then, your sister came out of a nearby obstetrician's office."

It was all true. Shiiba was sure of it.

"Your sister wasn't showing yet, but I knew right away that she was pregnant. She was wearing a loose-fitting dress and rubbing her belly with a happy look on her face. As soon as I saw her, I decided she was the one I wanted to shoot."

"Why? Why?" Shiiba didn't know whether the feeling welling up inside of him was anger or sadness. His heart pounded painfully, every blood vessel throbbed.

"As soon as she passed in front of the Koujin Association's office, I pulled the trigger without hesitation." Godou shrugged his shoulders and laughed. "Your sister had very bad luck. Poor thing."

Shiiba's anger exploded as Godou said this without an ounce of remorse.



That was why Yukari had been murdered? That was why the child inside of her had also died? Because some man shot her for fun?

“Later, when I found out she was a bureaucrat’s wife, I was surprised. I thought I might as well make the situation more interesting, so I told my uncle what I had done. He had another man sent to the police to confess. It was the same with my mother. That man would do whatever I said. Even though he knew what she was doing to me, he pretended like he didn’t, always at the most inconvenient times. I was satisfied that I had killed someone so I went back to Hong Kong. That’s it. What do you think? Is that the truth you wanted to hear?”

“You’re insane,” Shiiba growled. “Every last cell of you is insane.”

The black flames started rumbling up from inside Shiiba. He automatically raised his gun and aimed it at Godou.

“Do you want to shoot me? Then do it. I’m sure you’re longing to kill me right now. Just shoot me. All it takes is one movement of your finger. Don’t miss this time.” Godou almost looked gleeful as he taunted Shiiba.

Shiiba wanted to shoot him. He wanted to shoot and kill him right now. He wanted to fire a bullet into his stomach and make him drown in a sea of his own red blood. He wanted to rob him of his future. He wanted to kill him. He wanted to slaughter him. He wanted to so badly he felt like he was going crazy.

Shiiba steadied his aim and flicked down the hammer with his thumb. All he had to do was squeeze the trigger. He was within point blank range so he couldn’t miss.

Munechika and Shinozuka’s faces flashed in his mind. But they couldn’t stop him in the state of mind he was in now.

He’d already come to this point. He had been waiting for this moment for so long, it was no surprise that all of the anger within him was engulfing him completely.

He tightened his index finger. Everything could be solved in one second.

But just as he was about to shoot, his eyes met Kiri’s. She stared at him as if she were pleading with him. Her expressive eyes made his resolve waver.

He had prayed for Kiri. He had prayed that she wouldn’t get swallowed up by the darkness and that she would come back into the light.

But maybe he had been praying for himself all along. Maybe he had been unconsciously replacing her with himself.

So he had to stop. He had to stop right there.

Because there were people praying for him, too. Supporting him. Praying that he would stay as he was. For those people who cared about him, he had to overcome his hatred. He could overcome it.

After a few seconds of being conflicted, Shiiba lowered his gun.

“Are you going to run away?” Godou said with a taunting smile.

“If I killed you, nothing would change,” Shiiba replied. “I wouldn’t gain anything from it.”

“You are running away, you coward.” This time Godou raised his own gun and pulled the trigger without hesitation.

The shot pierced the upper part of Shiiba’s left arm. The bullet lodged deep in his skin. He was seized by an intense pain as blood started pouring from his arm, staining his shoulder.

He groaned in pain and he clutched his arm, backing away from Godou.

“Shiiba, you can’t hesitate to shoot someone,” Godou said quietly. “Passion isn’t what’s necessary to pull the trigger. It’s simply murderous intent and a calm judgment.”

Shiiba was cornered and he started to waver again.

Maybe he should shoot Godou. Maybe he had to pull the trigger in order to get out of there alive.

But before Shiiba could raise his gun, Kiri did something completely unexpected. She grabbed Godou’s right hand and tried to get the gun away from him.

“Stop, Kiri!” Godou yelled, pushing Kiri away with force. Her slender body fell down and she hit her head on a nearby piece of machinery.

“Kiri...”

She lay on the floor, not moving. Shiiba tried to run up to her, but Godou pointed the gun at him.

“You need to worry about yourself more than her,” Godou said calmly.

“See if she’s okay. Don’t you care about her?” Shiiba felt his anger rise again at Godou’s nonchalant face.

Godou couldn’t have just been using Kiri. Shiiba knew Godou had to have the ability to love people. He wanted to believe that.

“Yes, I care about her,” Godou replied, “because I love her. But right now, she’s going to have to die along with you.”

Shiiba was astounded at Godou’s indifference. He was saying he loved her, but he didn’t care if she died. Shiiba couldn’t understand it.

“I’m sure in the future I’ll remember Kiri and cry about it. But it’s not bad to live with sadness every once in a while. Sadness is one of the greatest feelings there is.” Godou looked at Kiri tenderly and sighed. “Kiri was my one-winged butterfly. When I was with her, I could be at peace. It’ll be agonizing to lose her. But I’m sure I’ll find another butterfly somewhere else. I’ll have to burn everything so I don’t have any regrets.” He took a lighter from his pocket, flicked it to spark a flame, and threw it behind his shoulder. The flame hit the floor and ignited the gasoline. Fire spread out all at once throughout the ironworks.

“Too bad for you, Shiiba,” Godou murmured with a sad look in his eyes. “I thought you would be the one to kill me. I’d been waiting for your anger and hatred to destroy me. But you made a mistake. I gave you so many chances, too...” He stretched out his arm and aimed his gun at Shiiba.

Shiiba didn’t have any time to be confused now. He pointed his own gun at Godou.

Godou smiled boldly. “It’s too late. You can’t kill me.”

Suddenly the dry sound of a gunshot rang out. Godou’s body shook violently and red blood poured from his side as he staggered.

“It’s my job to kill you.”

Shiiba turned around.

Munechika stood at the entrance of the ironworks holding a gun. Kaname was right behind him.

“I should have done this a long time ago,” Munechika added, walking nearer. “Before you became this crazy.” His face showed his strong resolution.

“You don’t have the right,” Godou replied as he staggered forward. “You ran away from me.” He aimed his gun at Munechika, but, before he could pull the trigger, Munechika quickly shot him. The gun flew from Godou’s hand.

“I didn’t run away. I just said goodbye. Long ago, I was drawn to your broken heart and I projected your warped heart onto myself.” Munechika walked forward and shot Godou again.

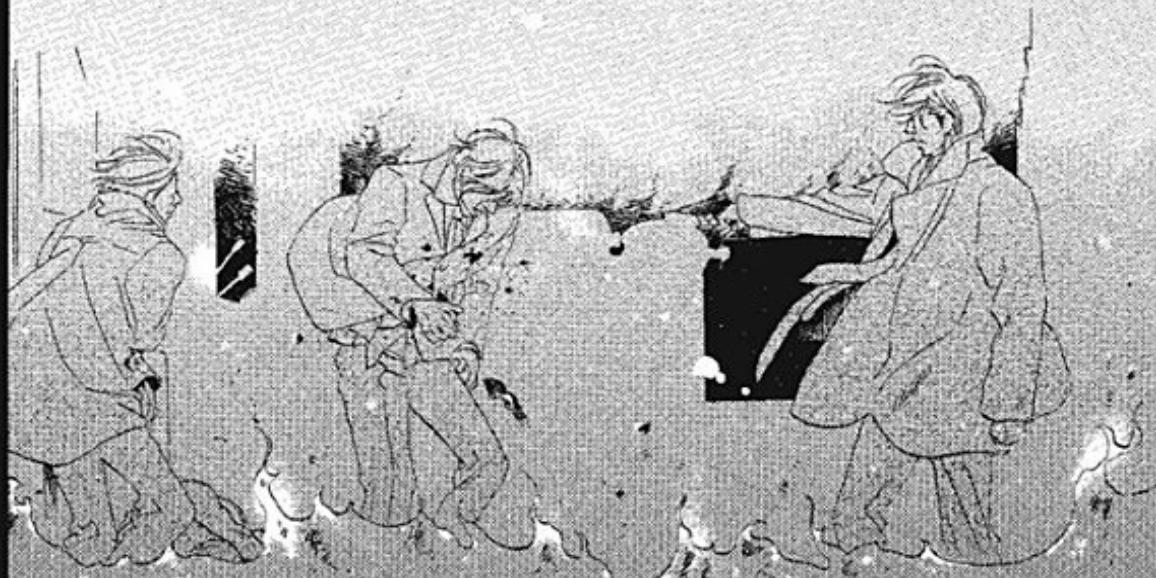
Blood spurted from Godou’s chest. But even though he was covered in blood, Godou didn’t fall down.

Just then the gas can that was behind Godou burst into flames.

Shiiba came back to himself. He quickly picked up Kiri, who was completely unconscious.

“That’s right...we’re alike...you...understand me...that’s...what I thought,

anyway..." Godou said, breathing painfully. "I thought you'd...understand me...more than anyone." He coughed and a lot of blood poured out from his mouth.



“Yeah, I did. We are alike, but we couldn’t be together. Your darkness is too deep. No one can save you from it. So let’s end this. I’ll end it for you.”
Munechika shot him point blank in the chest.

Godou fell backwards. He screamed. The flames that crept along the floor surrounded his blood-soaked body and engulfed him.

Kaname took Kiri from the injured Shiiba. “Shiiba-san, get out of here!”

The flames spread even more inside the ironworks. Besides the can of gas Godou had brought, there was gas and machinery oil already inside the ironworks as well. The building could blow up any minute, so they needed to get out as soon as possible.

“President, outside!” Kaname yelled when they heard another large explosion.

Shiiba plugged his ears to block out the loud sound. Splinters of metal came flying through the air, stabbing them. He could barely keep his eyes open with the smoke that hung in the air.

“Shiiba, over here!” Munechika grabbed Shiiba and ran out the door with him. Behind them another explosion erupted.

As soon as they were safe outside, Shiiba turned around.

On the other side of the smoke, there was a human figure on fire. A black human pillar inside the red flames. It didn’t move, as if it was waiting for someone.

Shiiba saw Godou, wrapped up in crimson flames, smiling as he always did.

Chapter 10

“Kiri Yoshizawa-san’s room is 302. Back there.”

Shiiba thanked the nurse and headed down the hallway. Just as she had said, Kiri’s name was on the door of room 302. He held up the small bouquet of flowers in his hand and slowly opened the door. Kiri was in the bed in the farthest corner of the four-person room.

“Kiri, are you awake?” he quietly asked Kiri, who had her eyes closed.

Kiri opened her eyes right away and immediately sat up when she saw it was Shiiba.

Shiiba sat down on a stool next to her bed and set the flowers on top of the refrigerator beside it. Kiri stared at them absentmindedly.

The hospital room was overflowing with the bright afternoon light. It was winter, but the sunlight was warm.

“Are you in pain?” Shiiba asked.

Kiri shook her head. The bandages wrapped around her head and left arm looked painful. She had been carried off in an ambulance and had had to get stitches in the back of her head. She had also broken her left arm when she fell, so the doctor had put it in a cast.

Shiiba himself had his left arm in a sling, but his injury wasn’t bad enough to have him hospitalized.

Three days had passed since that fateful night. Munechika and Kaname had hidden themselves as Shiiba entrusted Kiri to the paramedics, and then watched the firefighters from a distance. Several fire trucks had responded and it had been complete chaos. The firefighters desperately tried in vain to put the fire out, but in the end Yoshizawa Ironworks had burnt to the ground.

Both the fire department and police department had inspected the scene and found a large number of what seemed to be guns. COC5 had been deployed and had seized every last gun.

One strange thing had emerged. Godou’s remains were never found within the ruins.

No matter how Shiiba thought about it, there was no way Godou could have survived. Even if he had, he wouldn’t have been able to run away in his condition. The only explanation was that even his bones had been burnt to a crisp.

With the information provided to them by Shiiba, COC5 had investigated a man who had worked under Maruoka. The man had confessed that he had taken the inferior guns Maruoka had given out, gotten member information from his part-time job at a gun shop called “Gambino’s” and sold the guns on the internet. His testimony became a valuable part of the investigation. The incident was settled as a normal person selling illegal weapons.

Shiiba had recently received a phone call from Takasaki with some very unexpected news: “Tokujuuro Yoshizawa was the one making the illegal guns.”

Shiiba had been surprised as he continued to listen to Takasaki’s story. Apparently a detective from COC5 had questioned Yoshizawa in the hospital, and the old man had confessed.

Takasaki had gone on to say: “Yoshizawa passed away. Right after he confessed, his condition suddenly worsened and he passed away.”

Shiiba hadn’t said anything. He had squeezed his cell phone so hard he thought it might break.

The old man had passed away. Without being able to see Kiri.

Yoshizawa had covered for all of her crimes. He had protected her through life and death.

But Shiiba knew the truth, so he had been torn about whether he should admit that the confession was a lie or not.

But he had thought that since Yoshizawa had sacrificed his own life in order to protect Kiri, he should keep the truth to himself. He didn’t care if it was wrong. He could bear the burden on his conscience. He wouldn’t forget the heaviness of that lie.

It had been discovered that the one behind the series of illegal gun incidents had been Godou, Maruoka had been the seller, and Yoshizawa the manufacturer. But Takasaki had said that since all the major players in the incident had died, the case would never be completely solved, but that it would be tied up after a bit more investigation.

“Kiri, I have something to tell you,” Shiiba said quietly, his thoughts coming back to the present. Kiri cocked her head and just looked at Shiiba. “Your grandpa died today in the hospital.”

She must have been prepared for the news. She just clenched her teeth.

“Your grandpa covered up for all your crimes. He confessed to a detective right before he died.”

Kiri’s eyes widened with surprise.

“He protected you. I think that showed how much love he had for you.”

A translucent tear dropped down on the bandage wrapped around Kiri’s hand.

Shiiba saw Kiri crying, but still maintaining an expressionless face. Tears flowed across her cheeks and dripped down from her chin.

He felt a pang in his chest as he watched Kiri cry, unable to speak.

“What are you going to do now?” he asked.

She had lost Godou, her only protector, Yoshizawa had died, and she had even lost the ironworks. She was so much like a child he wasn’t sure how she could live.

Kiri wiped her tears away with her right hand and opened her mouth.

“It’ll be okay.”

Shiiba stared at Kiri’s face.

She had just said something. Not with her full voice. It was almost like she just breathed the words out.

Kiri wasn’t mute. She just hadn’t used her vocal cords for so long. But she could whisper.

“I’ll be okay,” Kiri said again.

As Shiiba heard her whispers, he realized something. “Was it you who told me it would be okay that time I was at Godou’s condo?”

Kiri nodded.

Motoaki had given Shiiba some drugs which had made Shiiba have a terrible dream. But Shiiba had felt someone hold him and whisper to him that everything would be all right. He had believed that it had been his imagination, that it had been Yukari’s voice.

“It’ll be okay. It’s just a bad dream.”

That voice had saved him.

“Thank you, Kiri.”

Kiri suddenly grabbed Shiiba’s arm and then she put her hand on her stomach.

“W-what?” Shiiba asked, surprised. “What’s wrong?”

Kiri nodded. Shiiba gazed at her and then looked at her stomach. “Kiri, you can’t be...”

“I’ll be okay,” she repeated again, and smiled.

I have another life inside of me. I’m not alone. I’ll keep living with this new life.

Shiiba felt that that was what her strong gaze was saying. He couldn’t find

any words to say. Kiri smiled so strongly, just like a mother would.

“So you really loved Godou...” Shiiba trailed off.

Kiri hadn’t been swallowed up by Godou’s darkness. Kiri had just loved him in her own way. That was why she was smiling. That was why she was so happy. Even though she didn’t know what would happen the next day.

Shiiba prayed for the happiness of the small life growing inside of her body. He didn’t believe in things like fate and karma. But he couldn’t help thinking that there was some meaning in Kiri’s pregnancy.

Godou had killed his own pregnant mother who carried his child, and shot and killed the pregnant Yukari. He had killed two women and two fetuses. He had had an untimely death himself. It was ironic that the only thing he had left behind was his own child.

No, Shiiba thought again. It wasn’t ironic. That was just the cycle of life. Kiri would give birth to Godou’s child. She would raise it. Probably with the deepest love...

She wasn’t showing yet, but as he watched Kiri put her hand on her stomach, Shiiba’s shoulders trembled. His eyes grew hot and he couldn’t stop the tears from flowing.

One life had ended and another had begun.

She was going to be all alone, but now the new life inside of her gave her hope.

The new life growing inside of Kiri was the single ray of light in this whole terrible situation.

After Shiiba left the hospital, he headed towards the parking lot and got in Munechika’s car. Today Munechika was at the wheel for a change.

They still hadn’t found the person who Godou had hired to go after Munechika. But Kaname had said the man probably wouldn’t have time to target Munechika since he, himself, was being targeted. This relieved Shiiba’s mind.

“Keep me company for a bit,” Munechika requested. “You’re free, right?”

Shiiba shrugged and said, “Yeah.”

“I think you’re in a position now where you can take a little time off,” Munechika mused.

Since Shiiba had gone to see Yoshizawa while under house arrest, he had been given even more time under house arrest. He wasn’t sure if he could go

through with it. No matter how much Takasaki tried, Shiiba always went against his orders. Takasaki also couldn't assure Shiiba that he wouldn't be transferred to another department once a decision was made by his superiors.

"Where are we going?" Shiiba asked.

"A drive to the beach," Munechika answered impishly.

"Hmph," Shiiba huffed. "That white sandy beach that you like?"

Munechika laughed and just tilted his head.

Apparently Munechika had the day off also because he was wearing a suit but no necktie. But the outfit didn't make him look sloppy, it made him seem even more wild and sexy.

Munechika headed towards the pier. The place where they had had it out. The place where Munechika had asked Shiiba to erase the record of him being an S. The place where Shiiba had cried.

"I thought you hated this place because it wasn't sexy," said Shiiba.

"That's what I thought," Munechika answered, "but I had a change of heart. Probably because someone let me make love to them here."

"Idiot," Shiiba replied as they both got out of the car.

The sun was setting and it had grown cooler. They hunched over against the cold wind. As they watched the tankers come and go along the coast line, Shiiba lit a cigarette. Munechika asked for one. Shiiba put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it for him.

"Hey, Munechika, why was Godou so screwed up?"

"That was out of nowhere," Munechika said, raising his eyebrow.

"While I was at Godou's villa, I heard about his mom. It was a terrible story. Did you know about it?"

"Yeah."

"And before, at his condo, he mentioned that he had told you his secret. Was it that he killed his mother?" Shiiba had wanted to ask that for a while now.

He wondered if Munechika knew the complete truth. He could understand about Godou's mother. He also knew that Godou had an intense hatred for his uncle and the Togetsu Syndicate, but he didn't know why.

"I feel like he really hated his uncle," he murmured.

"He did. He hated them both." Munechika stared at the cigarette in his hand. "Shiiba, Godou was actually a son of the Togetsu boss."

"Wasn't Godou his nephew?" Shiiba asked, confused. "If Godou was his

real son, why'd he raise him as his nephew?"

"That's all he could do," Munechika replied, "because his mom was the boss' younger sister."

"I know that, but ..."

Something clicked in Shiiba's mind and he stopped talking. Had Godou been the product of incest between the boss and his sister? Was he proof of the taboo between a real brother and sister?

"Did Godou know that since he was little?" Shiiba asked.

"Yeah. His blood was cursed. So in that way I felt sorry for him. He was so good-looking and had such talent, but he could never accept himself."

It was a world Shiiba couldn't even imagine. To hate your own blood. In a way, that was hating your own life.

Munechika continued. "When he lived at the boss' house, the boss' wife and his cousins treated him terribly. They told him he was dirty and cursed. But the boss doted on him, so even though Godou hated him, he couldn't cut him off. It was like the boss was trying to make up for his sin."

"So that's why the boss covered up for Godou for my sister's death."

"Probably. When children grow up they can leave their parents, but parents can never leave their children."

Munechika and Shiiba threw their cigarettes into the ocean.

Godou had been the son of his mother and his uncle, he had had a relationship with his mother, and, at the end, he had left a child. He had killed his child inside of his mother because he had hated his cursed blood so much. He had thrown away everything and become free for the first time.

He had said to throw away common sense and morals and conventions to have the life you wanted. But had Godou really been free? He had lived however he pleased, had acquired wealth and power, but he had still been caught up in his past and hadn't been able to escape a gruesome end.

He had probably shot Shiiba's sister because he had remembered his own mother.

Shiiba and Munechika stared at the ocean for a while, then Shiiba turned towards Munechika and said, "Munechika, I'm going to quit being a detective."

Munechika must have been expecting that because he didn't look surprised. "Why?"

"So I can be with you," Shiiba said clearly.

Munechika grinned. "A proposal? Isn't this a little sudden?"

“I’m serious,” said Shiiba. “You’re going to support Motoaki from now on, right? That means you’ll be working a lot more with yakuza. So that’s the only way. We can’t continue our relationship unless I quit being a detective.”

It hadn’t been an easy decision, but he couldn’t think of any other way.

His job or Munechika. If someone had told him to choose between the two, he would always choose Munechika.

“You can’t,” Munechika objected. “Keep being a detective.”

Shiiba shook his head. “You’ve compromised enough. Let me be the one to do it now.”

“It’s not like you to want a relationship where something has to be sacrificed,” Munechika admonished.

Shiiba couldn’t take it anymore. “Then what should I do?” he moaned, his feelings wavering once again. “What should I do?” He tugged on Munechika’s suit. “What should we do? Can an S and a detective really not be together as lovers? Do we have to just continue having that kind of a painful relationship?”

Munechika grabbed his hand and put it on his chest. “Give me some time.”

Shiiba looked up at Munechika. Munechika was looking back at him with strong, tender eyes. “Time...?”

“Yeah. I want to support Motoaki as much as I can. But that won’t be forever. Just until he can make it on his own. I have to rebuild the organization and make sure he can handle it by himself.” Munechika embraced Shiiba tightly and ran his hand through Shiiba’s hair. “After I’m done, I’ll come get you. By then I won’t be a yakuza anymore. I’ll be a man worthy of a detective like you. I promise.”

“Munechika...”

“So keep being a detective,” Munechika said quietly but fiercely. “Please.”

When they had first met, Munechika had asked Shiiba to quit being a detective and come work with him. Of course Shiiba had turned him down, but now Munechika was saying the opposite.

Shiiba knew Munechika’s words came not out of selfishness. They were words that came from his lover’s heart. He understood it so much it hurt. His chest throbbed in pain. In just one year they had come so far. Nothing had changed on the surface, but they had both changed so much inside.

Shiiba nodded, tears brimming in his eyes. “Okay. I understand.”

“Let me see your face.” Munechika put his hands on Shiiba’s cheeks. When Shiiba looked up, his eyes met Munechika’s strong gaze. “We can’t see each

other until it's all over. We can't call each other. Can you handle that?"

"I'll be okay." If it was for their future together, he would handle it, no matter how painful it was. That was all he could do.

"I promise," Munechika said fervently, "I'll come for you."

Shiiba bit his lip and buried his face in Munechika's chest.

Twilight colored the sky red and the afterglow began to fade.

When they part, Shiiba would have to erase Munechika's record as his S. Today was the last day he would see Munechika as his S.

Afterwards, they couldn't be involved in each other's business or personal lives. Shiiba had decided to live as a detective, so that was the least he could do.

But, even though he knew he would see Munechika again in the future, his heart felt like it was being ripped to pieces as Munechika held him tight.

But it wasn't over.

From then on, their new relationship would begin.

So Shiiba closed his mouth and didn't ask when Munechika would come to get him.

It might be one, two or even three years. But he would wait forever if he had to.



“Stop fighting,” Shiiba said to a young man as he closed the door to the investigation room.

The young man’s face lit up and he stuck out his chin. “Roger!”

He walked away and Shiiba sighed, exasperated. It hadn’t been a big deal. Someone had run into the young man on the street and had hit him. Then there had been a fist fight and the police took the combatants in. There hadn’t been enough injury to file a damage report, so the two had just been verbally reprimanded.

Shiiba returned to the office and sat down at his desk. Maehara, the one in charge of the station, was smoking a cigarette as he came up to Shiiba.

“Shiiba, you haven’t turned in your formal receipts,” said Maehara. “Today’s the deadline.”

“What?” Shiiba squawked. “Oh, man.”

He hadn’t calculated them yet, but he knew his expense report would be a lot. If he forgot to turn it in, he had to pay his own way, so he had to get it in on time. He quickly prepared the receipts. Halfway through writing, he looked up to see that he was the only one left in the office. He stood up and poured some coffee in his cup and stared out the window.

There were many cherry blossom trees planted around the station. The area outside was a beautiful sight at that moment. The trees were in full blossom and the wind blew the white petals across the air.

The area didn’t look like the business district, but more like a quiet suburb.

It had almost been a year and a half since he had been transferred to this small police station. When he had left the Metropolitan force, Takasaki had promised he would bring Shiiba back some day. Shiiba had been relieved somewhat.

Right now he was part of the Community Police’s Law Enforcement Department and was working every day. Since Shiiba had gotten his new appointment, not even one homicide had occurred. It was relaxing and peaceful there.

His new job meant that he didn’t have to worry about illegal guns. He didn’t have to have an S. He was thankful just because of that. He couldn’t have replaced Munechika. He couldn’t have found a better S anywhere.

At first everyone had viewed him as an elite from Headquarters, but now he had pretty much blended in with everyone else. Of course there were still some people who were cold and said he would just be called back to

Headquarters soon anyway. But Shiiba didn't mind those people. He had confidence that he could do a good job wherever he went now.

His job now wasn't that stimulating. But he had realized something through his days of dealing with trivial incidents concerning suspects and victims. He didn't have a job that involved crimes; it was a job that involved people facing each other. This was a fact that he couldn't have realized at his previous position. It was a valuable epiphany that made him realize the value of being a detective. He just had to take his job one day at a time. But, for the first time in his whole career, he was finally starting to feel glad that he had become a detective.

"Shiiba-san, want to go get some ramen?" Saitou asked as Shiiba was about to leave the office.

Saitou was the youngest detective on the force, but he was only about two years younger than Shiiba.

"Ramen?" Shiiba asked, then said teasingly, "Okay, but it's your treat, right?"

"Whaaat?" Saitou grumbled as they started walking out of the office.
"Why?"

"Because I paid before. Now it's your turn."

"Wow, Shiiba-san! You're greedy!"

Saitou admired Shiiba because Shiiba had been part of the Metropolitan force. He always wanted to hear stories about Shiiba's time there. Shiiba was also fond of the young man's cheerful demeanor.

"I'm off duty today," Saitou added, "do you want to come drinking with me?"

Shiiba frowned. "Don't tell me with the girls from the traffic division again?"

Saitou grinned. "Yep! Come on, just once have a drink with us! They're always asking me to bring you along."

"No, thanks."

"You're always so mean! Shiiba-san, you're not seeing anyone, right? Then just come!"

"Who said I wasn't seeing someone?" Shiiba complained with a displeased look on his face.

“Don’t just assume things.”

Saitou’s eyes widened and he stopped walking. “Wait, are you seeing someone? No way! What’s she like? When do you go out on dates? It didn’t seem like you were seeing someone!”

Shiiba glared at Saitou. “Sorry.”

“Oh, don’t tell me, it’s a long distance relationship? Is that it?”

“Yeah. That person is really far away.” Shiiba felt a little empty at his own joke.

He wasn’t far away. They were both in Tokyo. But even if he wanted to see that person, he couldn’t. He couldn’t even talk to him. So all he could do was wait. Because that had been their agreement.

“That must be rough,” Saitou murmured sympathetically. “I wouldn’t be able to handle it!”

Shiiba had been trying not to think about it, so he started to get angry at Saitou for bringing up the subject. But then he realized it was impossible to stay mad at Saitou. They both left the station, and as they were walking down the stairs, Shiiba’s cell phone rang.

“Sorry. Wait a second.” He looked down at the display and saw an unfamiliar number before he answered it. “Hello?”

“Who is that guy?”

It was a familiar, deep voice. Shiiba thought his heart would stop.

“Oh, so you’re seducing a young detective while I’m away?”

It was a nostalgic, teasing voice. Shiiba pressed the phone closer to his ear and looked around.

“You’re not very nice. And here I’ve been spending lonely nights all by myself...”

“Where are you?” Shiiba interrupted. “You’re watching me, right? Where are you?”

Then he saw it. A silver Lexus was parked across the street.

“Shiiba, I’ve come to get you. I’m sorry I made you wait.”

Once Shiiba heard those words, he couldn’t stand it anymore. He wanted to run to the car. “Saitou, I’m sorry,” he quickly said. “Something’s come up. Let’s do ramen another time.”

“Huh?” Saitou said, startled. “Are you serious? Is that your lover?”

“Yeah,” Shiiba admitted, and Saitou looked even more surprised. “That person came to get me. I’ll be able to see that person for the first time in so

long so I'm sorry.”

“It's okay,” Saitou cheerfully replied. “Go on! But I'm really surprised. I've never seen you look so happy. You must really be in love.”

Shiiba smiled. “See you tomorrow.”

“See you,” Saitou called out.

Shiiba ran down the street and, once he was sure there were no cars coming, ignored the green lights and ran across the intersection. He decided to ignore the law for just that moment.

The car was parked under the streetlights. Shiiba ran to it and peered in the window. He met the gaze of the man in the driver's seat. He quickly opened the door and slid into the passenger's seat.

“Have you been waiting long?” he asked breathlessly.

His question had meant if Munechika had been waiting for a while for Shiiba in that spot. But a different response came back.

“Yeah. About a year and a half.”

Shiiba laughed. “Me, too. Don't act all stuck-up.”

“Oh, really? Well since we both have waited so long, I guess we have a lot to talk about tonight.”

“Oh, we're just gonna talk?” Shiiba said teasingly, stroking Munechika's knee meaningfully.

“Don't tease me,” Munechika warned. “I'll make you cry!”

“I dare you,” Shiiba replied.

Munechika smiled and stepped on the gas. The car quietly sped away, carrying them into the night.

Afterword

Thanks for staying with this series until the end. This is the final volume of the “S” series.

After I finished writing S volume 2 (Love Bite) and heard I was going to be able to write two more books, I started worrying which direction to take for the ending. I didn’t know whether I should have Munechika and Shiiba have an endless rivalry or to give them a definite conclusion. In the end, I decided I needed to end the series definitively so I continued with “Afterglow” right after “Split” ended.

I’ve heard many different opinions from readers like “Please let Shiiba be happy” or “I don’t want a simple happy ending!” I know I can’t make everyone happy with my ending, so all I can do is pray you enjoy it. I liked Shiiba’s happy face at the end.

Two years ago, around this time, I was writing the manuscript for the first book. When I went to write the postscript, I looked at my plot. For character descriptions I had written “Masaharu Shiiba (his name was different then) is proud and cool, calm and collected, but he’s easily excitable” and “Keigo Munechika seems like a stoic, dangerous guy, but he’s actually just a pervert.” Pervert. (laugh) The point blank Mr. Magnum.

When I wrote the first book, I was really worried if the story was okay since there wasn’t much love in it. But when I sent the manuscript off, the editor said, “This is really interesting!” and after I wrote the afterword I found out it was going to be a series. At the time, it had only been six months since my debut, so I was really excited to get my first series!

And now this is my sixteenth book. Ever since I started S, it feels like the last two years have passed by in the blink of an eye.

To Chiharu Nara-sensei who did the illustrations: thanks for all your hard work! Words can’t express how thankful I am to you. I’m so happy you were

able to illustrate all four books. Thank you for all of your wonderful illustrations.

And to my editors: if I didn't have you, this series would never have been possible. Thanks so much for staying with me until the end. It was a great experience.

“S” was my first series, and amazingly enough it's become a CD drama! Thank you to everyone who made it possible for S to appear in so many different forms.

My fans have encouraged me so much with their warm words. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

The original story is going to end here, but there is a smaller story in the works. Hopefully I can relax now and enjoy writing about the characters of S. I'm waiting for all your comments!

October 2006
Saki Aida

"I have the right to know the truth. Answer me, Godou. Did you shoot her?"

At the end of S volume 3, detective Masaki Shiiba was last seen running away from the hospital room of his injured S, Keigo Munechika. Now, Shiiba has turned in his resignation, bought a gun of his own, and is bent on only one mission—to kill Takanari Godou.

Shiiba's instincts are telling him that Godou was the one who had killed his sister Yukari and is the person responsible for Munechika's injury. He vows to get the truth from Godou, even if he has to throw away his morals and life to do it. But can he do it? Can he shoot another person and commit cold-blooded murder for revenge? When he finds out more information about Godou's past, will his resolution waver? And when the young Kiri Yoshizawa is thrown into the chaotic mix, can Shiiba accomplish his plans without any remorse?

Find out the truth behind the lies and the answers to all the secrets in this exciting and heart-wrenching conclusion to the S series, S: Afterglow.

